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# Life as a student at an independent day school

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Life as a Student at an Independent Day School

by

Diana R. Torres

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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## Dedication

This study is dedicated to independent school students everywhere. We have been privileged in our education and should aspire to make a difference in our society.

## Acknowledgements

The work on this thesis has been an inspiring, exciting, challenging, and interesting experience. It has been made possible by many others who have supported me and I am deeply grateful for the invaluable guidance, support, and excellent advice of Jim Cavendish and Doni Loseke. Their constant encouragement (both professional and personal) and many discussions made this project a success. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to David Stamps for his invaluable experience and willingness to embark on this project. I am thankful to Maralee Mayberry, Shawn Bingham, Pat Greene, Joan Jacobs, and the late Spencer Cahill for their genuine interest in my success at the University. I am also thankful for my colleagues in the graduate program for sharing experiences and knowledge during our time of study, particularly Sharla Alegria, Amy Leuders, Hosley-Moore, and Annie Wagganer. I take this opportunity to express my profound gratitude to my wonderful parents, my fabulous sister, and my incredible fiancé, Jamie Hawken, for their moral support, patience, and love during the two years at USF. Above all, I am most indebted to the fifteen students who volunteered their stories and thoughts; this project would not be possible without them.

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## **Life as a Student at an Independent Day School**

**Diana R. Torres**

### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the interconnectedness of social class, education, and cultural capital. Considered academically elite, the independent school is an ideal environment to find increased instances and opportunities for the acquisition and reproduction of elite, or “dominant” cultural capital. By implementing an ethnographic approach within an independent school setting, this study attempts to illuminate the student experience through adolescents’ eyes. Past cultural capital studies focus on the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement and/or social reproduction; instead, this study focuses on the everyday student experiences as they point to potential indicators of cultural capital. Results suggest that students’ perception of ‘place’ is primarily defined by the presence or absence of money. Overall, the students interviewed expressed contradictory feelings towards having money, rejecting and distancing themselves from some of the advantages associated with wealth while accepting and welcoming other aspects.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In recent years, there has been an increased interest among policy makers, social scientists, and the general public in the kinds of educational opportunities for high school students. To a large extent, such a focus on education presents the controversy of differences between public and private schools (Greene 2005, Spring 2001, Cookson and Persell 1985, Falsey and Heyns 1984). To better understand the characteristics of and differences between public and private schools, a brief overview is warranted.

American lawmakers have long recognized the importance of universal education by making school compulsory for all children. The importance of education is further highlighted in the sense that most of the educational institutions within the United States are public. The primary purpose of public schools is to ensure every child has access to an education, especially since upward social mobility is potentially possible; in the historical evolution of public schools, “education was hailed as a means of ending poverty, providing equality of opportunity, and increasing national wealth” (Spring 2001: 6). Even federal policies such as the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 highlight the importance on the quality of public school education.

Alternatives to public education exist in the U.S., however, with private schools offering such opportunities. Instead of attending public schools free of charge (aside from taxes), private school students and parents are required to pay tuition. According to the

2003-2004 report from the National Center for Education Statistics, private schools account for 24 percent of all schools in the U.S. and they enroll approximately 10 percent (or 5,122,772) of all elementary and secondary school students (Broughman and Swaim 2006). During the same academic school year of 2003-2004, the National Association of Independent Schools estimates its total student enrollment to be 487,618; this translates to about 9.5% of the entire private school student population (NAIS, 2003-2004).

Careful attention to independent schools is warranted as they are the “elite” institutions of education. Yet what makes these institutions elite? The primary distinction between independent schools and other private schools is their literal ‘independence’ from other organizations: Independent schools own, govern, and finance themselves without the involvement from either the government or private religious organizations. Some independent schools may affiliate themselves with a religious faith, but oftentimes the union is solely historical as they were founded in the late eighteenth century. Independent schools have the ability and right to select specific students for enrollment according to their particular missions; consequently, student admission is considered a “privilege” and not a right. Clearly, independent school admission is contrary to the public school model where every student is welcomed. In addition, these institutions may hire faculty based on their own criteria, as well as creating their own standards for curriculum and student assessments. It is not rare to find that independent schools typically offer their students an array of additional opportunities including, but not limited to, athletic participation, music instruction, membership in school clubs and organizations, state of the art academic facilities, athletic facilities, and college counseling.

According to the statistics from the 2005-2006 National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS 2006), there are 1,000 NAIS-member independent day schools, where the average tuition for all grades was \$15,012 for one academic year. Of the students enrolled at independent schools, only 20.6% received some form of financial aid. These statistics indicate that independent schools are financially exclusive. Not only is a child's admission to the school not guaranteed, but also the cost will be prohibitive to many—if not most—families because the median household income is \$41,994 (1999 statistic, U.S. Census Bureau 2006). Even Patrick Bassett, the President of NAIS, admits that: “When we consider family income data carefully, we realize that probably only the top 4% of families in terms of income (\$200,000+) can readily afford an independent school education for their kids, and only the top 20% of families (\$100,000+) can stretch and sacrifice to pay, especially if they have more than one child” (Bassett 2006, E-Bulletin).

Not surprisingly, these opportunities and resources typically allow these independent schools to be “prep schools” that prepare students for admission to prestigious colleges and universities. In fact, prior research suggests that graduating from a private school is positively correlated with attendance at a four-year college (Rouse and Barrow 2006, Falsey and Heyns 1984), and more notably, admission to highly selective undergraduate institutions (Golden 2006, Persell and Cookson 1985). In addition, there is arguably a special kind of relationship between administrators at both colleges and select secondary schools that distinctly favors the selection and admission of independent school students (Golden 2006, Greene 2005, Persell and Cookson 1985). A practice called “bartering” reveals the personal and influential relationships between officials at

certain prep schools and elite institutions of higher education. Persell and Cookson (1985) suggest that select boarding schools “can negotiate admissions cases with colleges...[and] secondary school college advisors actively ‘market’ their students” (121-2). Consequently, officials at the secondary schools have an increased role that unequivocally influences the college admission processes of their students. Understandably, this is a position of privilege and power that favors students in independent school environments.

While independent schools include both day schools and boarding schools, the following examination will focus exclusively on day schools.

### **Research Questions**

Because the vast majority (about 80%) of independent day school students come from families in the top 20% of the U.S. socioeconomic strata, independent schools offer an ideal setting to examine the interconnectedness of social class, education, and cultural capital. At the forefront are the following questions: How do individual students understand and reflect on their everyday experiences at such privileged institutions? In what ways do independent school students display and legitimate students’ social class? How is what Bourdieu calls “cultural capital” demonstrated and reproduced?

## **Chapter 2**

### **A Review of the Literature**

To consider the research questions, I first develop a preliminary framework through a review of what is known about the relationships among education, elite culture, and cultural capital as each relates to the present study. The last section in this chapter, “Elite Education and Cultural Capital” aims to connect all the sections to highlight the major concepts of this project.

### **Education**

Research demonstrates that educational institutions reinforce the social division of labor through the social relations experienced in school (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Relations in the educational system perpetuate the division of labor by channeling the lower-tracked students toward a certain kind of labor, and the higher tracked students toward another (Bowles and Gintis 1976). The result is reproduction of educational and social differences, making social mobility difficult to achieve. Other research indicates that low-income students and students of color may be tracked for vocational courses to avoid joblessness; however, schools and administrators are unlikely to press these students from low-income and/or minority families to exceed such expectations (Oakes and Guiton 1995).

It is advantageous to be in a higher track in the schools, as research shows that these students are more likely to demonstrate satisfaction and interest in schooling,

experience greater self-esteem, and willingness to engage in extracurricular activities and athletics (Vanfossen et al. 1987). Most significant are the end results of tracking: “Low track students...reported lower educational aspirations and more negative academic self-concepts...attest[ing] to the existence of different expectations for the future roles in society among students” (Oakes 1982: 208). Long-term effects of tracking reveal another dimension of difference: in a study comparing two school systems, tracking practices resulted in African-American and Latino students being much less likely than Whites or Asians with comparable scores to be placed in high-track courses. Furthermore, the lower-track placements further disadvantaged minority students' achievement outcomes. That is, those who were placed in lower-level courses showed lesser academic gains over time when compared to similar students placed in higher-level courses. Ultimately, tracking created a cycle of limited opportunities and negative outcomes, and enhanced the differences between African-American and Latino and White students (Oakes 1995).

Research also shows that social class differences in educational institutions are influenced by the students' parents. Different styles of childrearing, disciplining, communicating, and reading, tend to transmit, and hence perpetuate their existing class condition (Rothstein 2004). Despite this strong link between social class and education, most people still believe in the “American Dream,” or “meritocracy.” According to McNamee and Miller (2004: 2), “Most Americans not only believe that meritocracy is the way the system *should* work; they also believe that meritocracy is the way the system *does* work.” In a study conducted by O'Connor (1999), the author interviewed poor African-American students and found that even these students, despite their dire socioeconomic situations, maintained a belief in meritocracy. Although they could point

to the structural constraints preventing them from getting ahead, they believed “that individual effort, hard work, and education [is] necessary for getting ahead in American society” (O’Connor 1999: 153). This is an important finding because it attests to a contradiction. While articulating a general acceptance of the ‘American Dream,’ these students simultaneously recognized social limitations due to their social locations. In sum, McNamee and Miller (2004), O’Connor (1999), Oakes (1982), and MacLeod (1995) conclude that their research indicates the American Dream is more an illusion than a reality.

Thus, education can be considered not as a cause but rather an effect of social class (McNamee and Miller 2004, Cookson and Persell 1991, Lewis and Wanner 1979). For example, working-class children get working-class educations, middle-class children get middle-class education, and upper-class children get upper-class educations. In each case, children from these different class backgrounds are groomed for the various roles they will likely fill as adults (McNamee and Miller 2004). Instead of a realized meritocracy, the educational system reflects, legitimizes, and reproduces class inequalities. In its end result, education denies equality and opportunity.

### **Elite Culture**

The most significant variable in the reproduction of educational and social differences is social class, which in turn impacts students’ educational tracking (Rothstein 2004, McNamee and Miller 2004, O’Connor 1999, MacLeod 1995, Oakes 1995, Cookson and Persell 1991, Oakes 1982, Bowles and Gintis 1976). If social class shapes students’ abilities in the classroom, it is important to understand how economic conditions function to determine the value of individual characteristics and dispositions

associated with different social classes. Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu [1973] 2006: 271) is at the forefront of this debate, and he contends the reproduction of social hierarchies in educational institutions “appear[s] to be based upon the hierarchy of ‘gifts,’ merits, or skills.” In reality, however, it is a “perpetuation of the ‘social order,’” or the evolution of the power relationship between classes.” Implicit in this hierarchy is the assumption that certain traits are better, or at least more revered, than others.

Bourdieu ([1984] 2006: 291) demonstrates such a relationship between the characteristics of economic and social conditions and the “distinctive features associated with the corresponding position.” That is, Bourdieu emphasizes the value of high culture as cultural capital, thereby suggesting that the culture of elites is more valuable than that of the working class (Bourdieu [1973] 2006). Consequently, lower class’ cultural capital is marginalized; by establishing binary relationships such as “high/low, pure/impure, distinguished/vulgar,” the categorization identifies and legitimates a dominant culture (Bourdieu [1984] 2006: 293). This binary framework posits high culture as not only a dominant culture, but also as superior to all others.

Independent schools in particular have the ability to concentrate many elite members’ children under one roof, and these associations have helped these children reproduce their parents’ statuses, and thus perpetuate social inequalities. Not surprisingly, these schools have historically educated and produced prominent and influential members of society (Golden 2006, Cookson and Persell 1991, Falsey and Heyns 1984). Because of their right to set their own admission criteria, independent schools may serve as the ultimate example of curriculum high-tracking and the method by which dominant culture is maintained. The select population who can afford to pay for an independent school

education also exert their power in society as members of what C. Wright Mills ([1956] 2006: 72) called the “power elite.” These individuals are in positions to make decisions with major consequences, being they are “in command of the major hierarchies and organizations of modern society.” More importantly, the power elite are aware of themselves existing as a social class. By sharing the top social stratum, the elite “feel themselves to be, and are felt by others to be, the inner circle of ‘the upper social classes’” (Mills [1956] 2006: 72). Thus, elite schools reflect the preferential treatment and reward children of the privileged (read: high socioeconomic class) with more valuable diplomas and degrees that provide access to further occupational and economic opportunity (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977).

Independent schools socialize students into an upper-class elite culture and effectively provide opportunities to establish friendships and connections with other elite families; it is this advantage that facilitates the reproduction of social class inequalities (Lewis and Wanner 1979, Mills [1956] 2000). Admission into such schools can be considered “a rite of passage” where the goal “is to transform the neophyte into a full-fledged member of the upper class” (Cookson and Persell 1991: 225). Consequently, wealth is a financial resource that can be transformed into other types of capital which have very real social consequences: the ability to purchase items such as books, computers, travel, status symbols and even a private education results in increased cultural capital (Orr 2003).

### **Cultural Capital**

Cultural capital is learned and promoted in many ways at independent schools (Cookson and Persell 1991). Cultural capital theory argues that the culture transmitted

and rewarded by the educational system reflects the culture of the dominant class. To acquire cultural capital, the student must have the capacity to receive it and then decode it. Thus, cultural capital must not only must be recognized, but also understood in order to be reproduced (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). But just what is cultural capital?

Generally speaking, capital can be defined as “resources that are acquired, accumulate, and are of value in certain situations or...are of worth in particular markets” (Spillane, Hallet and Diamond 2003). The possession of capital, whether it is cultural, social, human, educational, economic, political, symbolic, family or any other type of capital, has important implications for individual actors. According to Bourdieu ([1973] 2006), cultural capital is the most valuable form of capital in the field of education. It is defined as the class-stratified cultural dispositions and appreciation of cultural goods where individuals with high cultural capital enjoy favorable life chances because their cultural style is that of the dominant class. Cultural capital is comprised of cultural resources, or bodies of specialized information and knowledge including style, bearing, manner, and self-presentation skills, that are needed to travel and be fully accepted in elite social circles (McNamee and Miller 2004). Cultural capital can also be defined as high-status cultural signals such as attitudes, behaviors, preferences, and credentials that are commonly used for social and cultural inclusion and exclusion (Lamont and Lareau 1988). The following list provides examples of cultural capital as high status cultural signals: knowing how to consume and evaluate wine, owning a luxury car or large house, being thin and healthy, being comfortable with abstract thinking, knowing the appropriate topics for conversations in specific settings, and having a well-rounded cultural knowledge (Lamont and Lareau 1998: 156).

Possessing the dominant or elite form of cultural capital serves as a power resource by enabling groups to remain dominant or to gain status (Dumais 2002). Cultural capital functions like money, where it can be “saved, invested, and used to obtain other resources;” it is valuable because “it has currency because its ‘signals’ are broadly accepted” (Kingston 2001: 89). The inevitable result is that cultural capital enables the reproduction of the class structure by positing value on the dominant groups’ form(s) of cultural capital. Hence, cultural capital includes those aspects of a particular lifestyle that serve to separate its possessions from middle-, working- and lower-class individuals (Lamont and Lareau 1988).

The conceptualization of cultural capital is generally understandable in the context of our everyday lives, but almost impossible to operationalize in social research. This is not to suggest that attempts have not been made. On the contrary, numerous studies have sought to identify and locate cultural capital in everyday social life (Roscino and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999, Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997, Kalmijin and Kraaykamp 1996, Granfield 1992, Katsillis and Robinson 1990, DiMaggio 1982, Bourdieu [1973] 2006). However, social science research does not always have precise measures of theoretical concepts, and instead uses the closest measures available to test theoretical concepts empirically (Kao 2004). Bourdieu, for example, utilized indicators such as “consumers of” the museum, theatre, concert, and other such examples of “legitimate” culture. These activities are most likely to be done by members of the upper class who also possess greater education (Bourdieu [1973] 2006). Other sociologists have measured cultural capital as participation in elite cultural practices such as trips to museums and art galleries (DiMaggio 1982, Katsillis and Robinson 1990, Kalmijin and Kraaykamp 1996,

Roscino and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999), while still others have measured it through participation in activities such as dance and art classes in high-culture areas (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997).

### **Elite Education and Cultural Capital**

Several studies show that cultural capital plays a pivotal role in the reproduction of educational inequalities (Brantlinger 2003, Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997, Kalmijin and Kraaykamp 1996, Katsillis and Robinson 1990, DiMaggio 1982, Lewis and Wanner 1979). Other studies demonstrate how cultural capital reproduces social inequalities because they are based on socioeconomic class. For example, Aschaffenburg and Maas (1997) concluded the effects of parental cultural capital and cultural participation at varying ages have long-lasting impacts across the educational career, thereby indicating social class origin and cultural capital are connected. Similarly, other studies have demonstrated that cultural capital advantages are tied to higher socioeconomic status (Kalmijin and Kraaykamp 1996, DiMaggio 1982).

Most important for the present study, research on cultural capital suggests that cultural capital matters for students. Those who possess high cultural capital reap the rewards from educational institutions in terms of academic success (Roscino and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999, Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997, Kalmijin and Kraaykamp 1996, DiMaggio's 1982). It has been shown that there a positive relationship between cultural capital and school success, which can be demonstrated by high school grades (Roscino and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999, DiMaggio 1982). In addition, possessing and exhibiting cultural capital is considered beneficial in schools because children who are exposed to cultural capital are better prepared to achieve academically, better understand abstract

and intellectual material, and may be favored by teachers (Kalmijin and Kraaykamp 1996). Students who demonstrate cultural “proficiency of higher status groups” are rewarded by teachers in schools because “they value it themselves or because they recognize that it is valued by elites and reward it accordingly” (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997: 577). Furthermore, students who participated in activities considered ‘valuable cultural practices’ (such as visiting art museums and attending classical music performances) were favored by schools and teachers as they were perceived to be more intelligent than students who lacked those experiences (DiMaggio 1982). Ultimately, schools reproduce the class social structure within the educational system by recognizing students’ awareness, acceptance, and performance of such elite cultural norms and values; thus, students are rewarded by having the dominant form of cultural capital (Bourdieu [1973] 2006).

By contrast, students who do not possess dominant cultural capital experience more difficulties in their academic careers. A lack of cultural capital can discourage students from staying in school, and by otherwise negatively influencing their academic achievement, including the experience of being overlooked and/or neglected by teachers (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997, Kalmijin and Kraaykamp 1996) These students tend to be in lower status groups in which members have resource-poor networks, have limited access to high cultural capital, and are prevented from obtaining access to the rewards of elite cultural capital (McNamee and Miller 2004).

Granfield’s (1991) study of working-class students explored the negotiating processes of students who lack cultural capital at an elite law school. Through observation, interviews, and surveys, Granfield (1991: 127) found that while these

students were initially proud to identify with their working class roots, many came to consider themselves “cultural outsiders.” Many working class students experienced much more anxiety about their academic and social inadequacy than their middle-class counterparts. Granfield attributed this deficiency to a lack of cultural capital, and as a result these students learned to strategically manage their identities. One way was to implement appearance management, whereby these students successfully “mimicked their more privileged counterparts” (Granfield 1991: 129). By “looking the part,” students were successfully welcomed and promoted into professional advancement. Impression management is important to creating a sense of belonging. In the same way, Goffman (1951: 294) illuminates the importance of ‘status symbols,’ which indicate a presence of “cues which select for a person the status that is to be imputed to him and the way in which others are to treat him.” By adopting expected status signs, the students in Granfield’s study were better equipped to fulfill the expectations of their status as elite lawyers.

### **Predictions and Possible Implications**

I am predicting that cultural capital promoted by the independent school setting and displayed by the students is the same dominant type of high-brow cultural capital that is revered and rewarded in the larger United States society. Applying Bourdieu’s ([1973] 2006) reproduction model, students who come from lower social classes with less financial capital may be at a disadvantage in the independent school, whereas students with more financial capital from wealthier populations may experience certain advantages. Consequently, if students possess indicators of increased cultural capital, then the students’ self-esteem, comfort, and academic success in the school should be

greater. Conversely, students with less or limited indicators of dominant cultural capital (or with non-dominant types of cultural capital) may experience greater challenges at the school.

Although current research has looked at the long-term effects of students and cultural capital, this study aims to examine how adolescent students currently perceive and experience their everyday lives in an independent school environment. By implementing an ethnographic approach within the independent school setting, this study attempts to illuminate the student experience through these adolescents' eyes. Much of the research on cultural capital has been distanced from the students themselves, making the need to recognize and acknowledge the meanings created by the students more apparent. This research aims to give adolescents a voice, and by focusing on their experiences, challenges, and rewards, I intend to learn from the students (as prompted by Corsaro 1992). In addition, all of the previously cited cultural capital studies focus on the relationship between cultural capital and academic achievement and/or social reproduction; instead, my study will focus on the everyday experiences of the students as they point to instances of potential cultural capital indicators. Considered academically elite, the independent school should be an ideal environment to find increased instances and opportunities for the acquisition and reproduction of "high-brow," or elite, cultural capital.

In this study, cultural capital will be operationalized in whatever ways the students indicate in their exchanges with me. Since this study focuses on the student experience at an independent school, many student reflections will likely demonstrate privilege that is facilitated by social class. Ultimately, however, this study is based on the

belief that everyone, regardless of their social class, possesses some form of cultural capital. The degree to which students are legitimated should be of particular interest to sociologists because it will inevitably transcend class divisions and may also extend to a myriad of other issues such as race, gender, and sexuality (Kingston 2001, Riehl 2001). As the sole researcher, I was conscious not to ignore “other” (not dominant) forms of cultural capital, but to recognize and provide a better understanding of it. Poor people are considered a marginalized population, and to not recognize their forms of cultural capital would only perpetuate the cultural reproduction of the dominant (wealthy) class. Overall, I am especially interested in the ways social class, education, and cultural capital intersect to reveal more about the world in which we live.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

The data reported in this study come from fifteen students who attended the Rosetta Day School (RDS) during the 2006-2007 academic year. Although RDS is an independent school for grades 6 through 12, I focused specifically on students in grades 11 and 12.

All requirements by the University of South Florida Institutional Review Board were met for this study. In the fall 2006 semester, I attended mandatory school assemblies at the Rosetta Day School to announce the research opportunity. I also introduced myself and this project as I spent time with the students during their lunch hours for one week. To recruit students, I fielded questions and distributed flyers (see Appendix 1: Flyer/Contact Sheet). School administrators also issued a school-wide announcement in the parent's newsletter with information about the research project and ways to contact me if their child(ren) were interested in participating. To generate even more student interest and answer any questions, I provided free pizza for juniors and seniors. As an added incentive, I advertised a raffle awarding one \$75 gift certificate or charity donation in the student's name. Only students who completed the individual interview were eligible for the raffle prize. For students unable to attend the sign-up/pizza opportunity, I left my contact information with school administrators for easy and convenient student access.

At the conclusion of the recruitment period, a total of forty-six students expressed interest in participating in the study. After initially contacting all interested students via e-mail or phone numbers provided by the student, fifteen students ultimately responded with available days and times for interviews. Interviews took place only after the student had given me the signed parental consent form, read and signed their own assent form, and any further questions or concerns were addressed. While I gave all students the option of where to meet (school, off-campus, or at home), I interviewed most of them in a room or private area of the school, often right after school ended. Sometimes students preferred to meet at a local coffee shop or restaurant within driving distance of the school. I interviewed only two students in their homes, and on both occasions the parents or guardians were present. All of the settings were private, although during the two home interviews, parents were within hearing distance. I conducted semi-structured interviews to allow for flexibility and increased student direction. Open-ended questions prompted students to reflect on their personal experiences and thoughts in order to indicate how they make sense of the world around them. Among the questions asked: Why did you decide to apply to RDS? Tell me about your friends at RDS. What are some of the issues you and your friends face at this school, if any? Do you feel that you are a part of the community here? (See Appendix 2: Interview Questions)

The interviews, which were conducted in late November and early December 2006, were audio-taped and ranged in length from 40 to 75 minutes. All interviews were transcribed, coded and then analyzed. Each interview was as informal as possible, including pre-interview chatter and maintaining a conversational tone, facilitating the respondents' comfort with the researcher and encouraging the students' willingness to be

candid. The fact that I am young (25 years old at the time of the interviews) and wore casual clothes to the interviews (such as jeans, knit tops, and flip flops) helped reduce social distance between me and the respondents. It also aided in providing some basis of rapport. Additionally, elements of my personal educational history were consistent with those of the respondents, specifically having attended and graduated from an independent high school and private liberal arts college (most of the students planned to apply to at least one liberal arts college). Although this experience provided some common points of reference, there were also significant differences. My experience of attending such school on scholarship and financial assistance, Colombian heritage, other state of origin (New York), and working-class family background, necessarily made me an outsider from all of the students.

### **Rossetta Day School**

The Rossetta Day School (RDS) is a private school in a medium-sized city in the south; it is also a member of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS). RDS is governed by an independent Board of Trustees which includes parents, alumni, business and civic leaders of the city and surrounding area. Each trustee is nominated by a committee and if elected, serves for three years. Currently, the endowment at Rosetta Day School is nearly three million dollars.

Since its inception, the school has encouraged its students to develop and flourish academically, athletically, and artistically. The school has a competitive admissions process, and RDS prides itself on the rigorous academic training it offers the students. The average graduating class is about 100 students and there are almost 700 students enrolled in grades six through twelve. This coeducational institution offers its students

state-of-the-art facilities on its 150,000-square-foot complex which, in addition to spacious classrooms, includes science labs, computer labs, library, full size basketball courts, swimming and diving center, exercise facility, art rooms, photography lab, dance studio, performance studio, wrestling room, and music facilities. Half of the faculty members hold advanced graduate degrees, and class size is kept small. In a typical classroom, there are less than twenty students for every one teacher. In order to graduate, students must complete four years of English, three years of Math, and three years of a foreign language (Latin, French, or Spanish). Examples of the creative and advanced classes available to students include: Harlem Renaissance, Shakespeare's Plays, Advanced Calculus and Linear Algebra, Marine Biology, Microeconomics, Sculpture, Photography, and College Prep Writing.

Athletic options for students also demonstrate the diverse array of opportunities. Team sports include soccer, swimming and diving, golf, basketball, baseball, softball, crew, tennis, track, and several others. RDS prides itself in being athletically successful, and the school has earned almost 20 Team State Championships as well as several Individual State Championships since their inception. Other extra-curricular activities are also available for students and they include a variety of student clubs and groups; for example, students can join and/or participate in the Student Council, Community Service, Literary magazines, School Newspaper, Dance, Debate, and language clubs.

The school has a 100% acceptance rate to colleges and universities, and virtually all RDS's graduates go on to attend 4-year institutions that include Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Stanford, and Yale. Other colleges and universities that are popular with the graduates are: Amherst, Boston University, Davidson, Duke, Emory, George

Washington, New York University, Purdue, Rollins, Tulane, Wake Forest, and well-known state universities. Academically, RDS offers a competitive curriculum that includes Honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. In 2006, more than a quarter of the AP's taken by RDS students resulted in scores of 3 or higher; most colleges and universities give college credit for such scores. Additionally, SAT scores for the year 2005-2006 demonstrate the caliber of students enrolled: the lowest 25% of RDS students scored a 520 in Critical Reading, a 520 in Mathematics, and 510 in Writing. By comparison, 50% of the nation's high-schoolers scored a 500, 520, and 490, respectively. In every category, the lowest performing RDS students scored the same, if not better, than *half of the nation's* students. In fact, almost 20 RDS students earned National Merit recognition during the 2005-2006 academic school year.

Tuition for one year at RDS is over \$14,000 per student, although there is need-based financial aid for families who qualify on a first-come, first-served basis. Priority is given to returning students, and according to school administrators, 12% of the RDS student population receives some form of financial aid.

## Chapter 4

### Findings

The interviews I conducted with the students at the Rosetta Day School (RDS) exposed me to the real life experiences and reflections of current students living in their particular academic and social world. In many ways, these students are among the most privileged in the nation (and arguably, the world), as they all belong to an institution that is a prime location for establishing elite culture and cultural capital.

Self-reports of race for the students included 10 White, 3 bi-racial (1 Cuban and Black, 1 White and Spanish, 1 Asian and White), 1 Black, and 1 Asian. All but one were born in the United States. The final sample of students included ten seniors and five juniors. Eleven students were females and four were males. All students were between the ages of 16 and 18 at the time of their interviews. Of the students, three reported being on some form of financial aid. The following are additional demographical characteristics:

- Students began their careers at RDS at various grades: 4 began in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 2 in 7<sup>th</sup>, 1 in 8<sup>th</sup>, 5 in 9<sup>th</sup>, and 3 in 10<sup>th</sup>
- Educational histories ranged from *no* prior public schooling (4 students), *some* prior public school (9), to *all* prior public schooling (2)
- Seven of the students had one or more sibling(s) also enrolled at RDS

- Of the students' parents, 11 were married, 3 were separated or divorced, and 1 was unable to provide marital status information (the student did not know)

To get a preliminary sense of students' financial resources, I assessed their house values using [www.zillow.com](http://www.zillow.com), an online real estate service that is publicly accessible. The values of students' homes ranged from \$217,000 to \$2,275,000. Students whose homes were valued under \$500,000, listed as lowest to highest, are: Brenda, Melinda, Felicia, Tamar, Stacey, Amy, and Eric. The remaining students' whose homes valued over \$500,000 are, in ascending order: Christine, David, Nora, Laura, Owen, Julia, Katie, and Ryan. Melinda, a student whose parents are divorced, lives with one parent whose home is valued significantly under \$500,000. Her other parent's home, however, is valued well over \$1,000,000. Most notably, she is the only student interviewed who was currently employed part-time while attending school. This information is valuable in the following analysis of personal experiences within the independent school setting, especially when considering the close connection between financial and cultural capital.

As is evident, the demographic characteristics of students I interviewed varied in multiple ways. Of most interest are their outlook, understanding, and evaluations of their academic institution and the students' place in it. The first part of this section considers some of the experiences identified by students that point to indicators of the dominant culture. By describing the status quo, the interviewed students also reveal aspects of their own self-consciousness and self-awareness, especially as they relate to perceptions of financial matters and school diversity.

The subsequent sections critically examine students' perceptions of their place in such a culture, revealing two primary and contradicting themes. Students' responses

about their experiences in and perceptions of the independent elite school culture indicate: (1) their recognition and acceptance of elite culture and its advantages, and (2) their rejection of and distancing from indicators of elite culture. The interviews suggest that the students' understandings of their independent school environment were, in fact, conceptually and experientially contradictory.

### **Setting the Scene: The Dominant Culture**

As is expected in an independent school setting, the presence of money is prevalent throughout the interview data since many students and their families have high financial capital resources. As the following show, the independent school experience of the students interviewed is rooted in a language of "us" and "them." Students often positioned themselves against or counter to other groups of students, and what is most significant about the separation of "us" and "them" is that most of the differences are established in relation to money.

The students I interviewed shared their reflections and experiences between themselves and their classmates. In doing so, they also pointed to indicators of the dominant culture prevalent in their independent school environment. Oftentimes students' self-awareness is closely linked to their financial situations. The two extremes prompted different reactions: some students on financial aid face possible social and academic exclusion, while very wealthy students experience social criticism. In both situations, the students' perceptions provided indicators of the dominant culture.

Students' reflections of student body diversity further demonstrate how the dominant culture impacts students' self-awareness, particularly when comparing themselves to underrepresented groups and populations.

For one student receiving financial aid, the issue of money and financial capital appears to be easily managed. Brenda reports that “[being on financial aid is] no big deal or whatever...that doesn’t separate **me** from **them**, really. **They** don’t bring it up at all so it’s not a big deal [Emphasis added]”. While she is one of three students I interviewed who received financial aid, she believes that this status does not impact the way other students, specifically “they” who pay full tuition, view her. This is an important comment because it demonstrates the extent to which Brenda feels as though she is accepted within the greater majority of students that presumably possess more money than her family. To her, being on financial aid is a non-issue. However, the use of “me” and “them” suggests there is a fundamental difference after all.

Unlike Brenda, Felicia believes money is an omnipresent issue at RDS. She remarks that the school often “doesn’t even realize the fact that not everyone has money.” She, too, receives financial aid and describes a graduation requirement all students have: a week-long class trip. Parents are expected to pay for the expenses of this requirement, although the student can opt for the 20-page paper meant to replace the trip. In addition, course selections can result in added financial burdens. For example, Brenda shares that “if you take physics, you have to go to [the amusement park] and you have to pay for it.” Yet, one ticket to an amusement park can often exceed \$40. These examples, added to the fact that additional tuition money is required for summer school (discussed later), indicate that some students and their families may face financial constraints in participating fully, or even comfortably, at the independent school.

Even other students, specifically non-financial aid students, are conscious of financial aid students’ conditions and limitations. One student, Melinda, is able to

identify students receiving financial aid because “they’re not afraid to say it. I know the kids and **they** don’t really have rides anywhere and **they** gotta catch the bus and **they** kind of like live down in the ghetto.” She also observes that “a lot of kids that I know that are on financial aid [are] not the big social people. **They** don’t have all the friends, **they** don’t have all the parties, they don’t have all the clothes. I mean **they** have a small group of close friends” (Emphasis added). Again, the idea that money matters is evident in the ways students look and how they present themselves on a daily basis. Melinda’s comment also suggests that perhaps students who can not afford the “right” clothes experience very real social consequences from their classmates, specifically exclusion.

In fact, Julia, another full tuition-paying student remarks that: “[Y]ou have to pay tuition and...if you want to fit in with the mainstream crowd you have to have money for nice clothes.” One possible conclusion suggested by Julia is that greater financial resources may enable students to ‘blend in’ and look like the majority of students. In practice, the task of looking like others in the student body requires some financial capital: students have to purchase the clothing and accessories. Amy summarizes that “girls and guys mostly wear Lacoste...a lot of Lacoste and Ralph Lauren Polo and that kind of stuff. The girls, they wear a lot of Juicy Couture and Lacoste and hand bags, mostly Louis Vuitton and Coach, probably the most prevalent.” Of course, all the brand names mentioned are typically expensive.

Students on the other end of the spectrum—students with a lot of money—also elicit negative reactions. Many of the students interviewed initiated the “us” and “them” separation technique to distinguish themselves from classmates who basked in their

family's financial wealth. One of the major complaints cited was the over-emphasis on material things. As expected, such material objects were used as high status symbols:

*AMY:* I don't like many people here. **They're extremely materialistic.** Most of them are very immature. I just tend not to like many people... **There's a lot of people that show their status and that kind of stuff really comes out...** [Most conversations, if you walk down the hall with girls have to do with what they bought on their shopping trip the night before or what kind of car they're driving. [Emphasis added]

*RYAN:* [Money may be a necessary thing] and that might be, most likely a subconscious thing but **it's a showing off of the money** whether you want to show off your money or not. I think that's how it comes out. It may be kind of vicious of me but... [Emphasis added]

Both Amy and Ryan suggest that some students may end up showing their ability to purchase expensive items. While Amy points to those students who do so deliberately, Ryan suggests that perhaps some students may end up giving that information even if it was not their intention. This is interesting because he notes the possibility of students simply having expensive items and clothing, and not because they want to show off but rather because they simply or naturally own the materials. That is, having such items may be a normal part of their existence.

For Laura, a non-financial aid student, it took some time to realize that the emphasis on the material objects was temporary and superficial. She recalls that:

Like freshman year, I thought and all the other freshman girls thought this too, **that you had to carry a Coach purse**; there's definitely a lot especially among the younger girls. They think that going into the school, that's what you have to be like. By the time sophomore year is over and you go into junior year, the girls are like "Wait a minute, no one really cares." **And no one really does care.** It's just really not an issue. I think it just takes some time for everyone to mature and realize that it's not important. [Emphasis added]

The idea that students may feel as though they have to conform and buy specific brands and material objects is typical of many adolescent settings; however, they may also be more pronounced in an environment like an independent school since most students hail from the upper classes. All of the students' comments above suggest that owning the "right" material possessions *could* and *often do* result in higher social standings. Yet to accept that owning expensive material goods confirms one's social value (as in friendships, acceptance into peer groups, etc.) legitimates the idea that individuals need money in order to be accepted. Laura's comment may indicate otherwise: perhaps owning such things may be temporary and superficial after all. Still, access to money, whether it is to buy purses, clothing brands, or other material goods has the possibility of positively influencing and affecting students' experiences in the independent school. In fact, some students interviewed reported additional services obtained with parents' financial capital, including: private language tutors, private music lessons, traveling to visit prospective colleges with family members, and even hiring a private college counselor. Students' general awareness and reflections suggest that money—whether it is present or absent—does ultimately matter.

The students interviewed provided their perceptions of diversity at the school, and in doing so they exposed much about their own self-awareness and the populations lacking adequate representation at their school. During the interviews, each student was asked to define diversity according to his/her own ideas and requirements. As a result, I received a variety of different responses that indicated the myriad of ways diversity can be defined and considered. The traditional or expected response citing racial diversity did occur, and most students commented on the racial diversity at the school:

*DAVID:* Race-wise...I could probably count the black people on both hands.

*OWEN:* Racial...we don't really have diversity there. It's so small its almost negligible.

According to these students, racial diversity seemed to be particularly lacking. Julia, a non-financial aid student, provides her explanations for the lack of racial and ethnic diversity:

Ethnic diversity, I feel like **it's mostly a White school, which I wish there was more diversity but yea, that's just the way it is.** Maybe [due to] like economics, like financial problems is an issue. Yea, I guess that probably plays a big part. I don't think it has anything to do with intellectual abilities or anything. Definitely not. [Emphasis added]

Julia explicitly distinguishes between financial and intellectual ability, a noteworthy distinction that no other student made in the interviews. The characteristics of race and class are oftentimes collapsed within independent schools; more specifically, underrepresented groups such as African Americans and Latinos are often-times absent from the independent school world by the simple limitation of family financial resources.

In general, the students interviewed are aware that high financial capital is generally the norm for the majority of independent school students. A few of the students interviewed identified the lack of social class diversity. Eric even makes the quip that "there's a couple kids who are not there with money...but **there's a lot of them [with money]**, almost all of them have enough money to buy the school pretty much. Like if they pooled all their money, they could buy the school [Emphasis added]." The students interviewed, no matter whether they received financial aid or not, were conscious of the presence of money at their school.

Felicia, an African-American student on financial aid, points to a potential effect of class and race at the school. In particular, she suggests it negatively affects the support network between herself and other black students:

I still don't talk to the [blacks] in my grade. Like I'll say hi to them but its not the same. I have reasons. I just don't. I get along with people, I just...they're more preppy than I am and stuff, and **they're richer than I am so they get along with those group of people better.** [Emphasis added]

Asked how she knew they had more money, she responded, “[Because] I look at their parents and stuff, I mean, we used to talk...yea. Like you can tell, just like materialistic things. Like where they live.” Even though black students at the school share their race, Felicia did not connect with those other students because of the apparent social class differences. In this environment, social class cohesion trumps racial cohesion.

### **Elite Cultural Advantages**

Towards the beginning of each individual interview, I asked the student why s/he chose to attend Rosetta Day School. All of the students' responses indicated a general preference for the independent school insofar that it was simply a better academic alternative to public schools. For example:

*AMY:* I know that [my parents] just wanted the best education possible and I know that my mom being around the education system just does not have much faith in [state's] public schools.

*MELINDA:* [My perception of public school is] bad. My mom's a teacher at a public school, so its like amazing how little knowledge these people can have about English, and writing sentences, and they still manage to pass 12<sup>th</sup> grade when they're basically illiterate.

*LAURA:* [M]y parents just wanted me to take the right path.

Like Amy and Melinda, most students cited their parents' disdain toward the public school system. Additionally, all students suggested that ultimately, RDS was simply better than any public school. Presumably, the "right path" Laura alludes to includes access to the secondary schools that would contribute to the guarantee of later success in life. For the students in this study, their enrollment in the independent school demonstrates how they believe public schools are bad—especially when compared to RDS.

Furthermore, Brenda, a student of color who attended a predominantly Black public school through 5<sup>th</sup> grade, reflects on that experience: "I didn't really fit in. I didn't talk like a public school girl. I spoke educatedly. They used Ebonics and slang, and I was disconnected from that because I didn't know about that." Her disdain and disapproval of Ebonics points to her belief in the connection between education and language; Brenda suggests that public school reflects the absence of education, even though she uses "educatedly," a non-existent word. Nonetheless, her point is clear: she was better than Ebonics and better than public school. In doing so, Brenda legitimates her place at RDS.

Similarly, Felicia, another student of color recruited from public school in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, contrasts herself from her public school friends:

[I've changed in] the way I talk. We just laugh about it. It's so much different. Like you can notice it. They're like, "you talk so different now." Cuz I correct them now. They're like "I'm not doing too good" and I'm like 'well.' **They're like you're such a little White girl now.** [Emphasis added]

Like Brenda, Felicia is able to compare the types of students from her past public school and current private school. Her ability to correct others' English is likely a demonstration of education and knowledge, and for these friends, that translates to being "White."

Brenda and Felicia had to negotiate the value of language at some point in their lives, as both girls were a part of public and private schools with different norms. Ultimately, their enrollment at RDS confirmed the assumed superiority of the independent school environment and its education, thus further empowering them in relation to their public school counterparts.

In addition (and not surprisingly), the students I interviewed believed that colleges and universities actually preferred students who attended independent schools. For example:

*BRENDA:* [The best part about this school is] how colleges look at you because they know you're going to private school and that **its harder than regular public school**. That's the reason I'm doing [this]. [Emphasis added]

*CHRISTINE:* [The best part about being a student here is] probably getting a really, really good education...I think overall I'm really, really prepared for college and I've learned a lot and the classes are small...even though sometimes there's a lot of work and it kind of sucks, I know that in the end, **I'm getting the best education**. [Emphasis added]

*KATIE:* The fact that prep schools, especially [this school], **all your classes are automatically honors** which [is] really appealing. I'm used to having all honors classes so it never occurred to me that they were technically harder classes than what most high-schoolers would take. It just never occurred because I was used to it by the time I finished middle school. You know, it was important for college. My parents were always thinking about the future and I started thinking about college when I was in eighth grade. [Emphasis added]

*NORA:* I think that my parents thought that since I had higher college ambitions, certainly [RDS] **on your college application looks good because they know that you've gotten a good education**. [Emphasis added]

The link between independent schools and a good education is apparent in the students' responses. The students believed that college admission is a testament to the good

education received at their independent school. This belief implies that a good education is found in independent schools, where students not only *can* do better, but also *should* be better. That is, independent schools' contribution to college entrance demonstrates how parents, and subsequently their children, sincerely believe independent schools are superior to other types of schooling.

Some of the students I interviewed also shared another perspective of fellow students altogether, pointing to examples of those who do not meet the typically high academic expectations of the independent school. Laura shares her frustrations about some of her classmates:

[Administrators were asking] “Well why doesn't it work when we call home to the parents?” My response is “Parents, they don't give a shit.” **They send their kids to a day care, they pay money and their kids go here and they think that they're getting a good education** but meanwhile when they're not looking, bad things are happening. [Emphasis added]

Laura suggests that for some parents, simply having their child(ren) attend an independent school fulfills their obligation to provide a “good education.” Not only are independent schools believed to offer only excellent classes, but they are also believed to have superior, motivated students. This idea may be a taken-for-granted fact of independent schools and other elite educational institutions.

These instances of disruption from the expected norm illustrate how the advantages of independent school are recognized and accepted. Being a student at an elite school like RDS has its advantages, regardless of academic motivation and/or performance. Christine describes this trend well:

I think that there are **two tracks at RDS**. [O]nce you get to sophomore year, you're allowed to pick what classes you want to take, and there's like

**usually the type of student who'll pick the harder classes and there's the type of student who doesn't...** But I kinda think like a lot of time people pick the same classes are the people who end up the same. Like there's the people who pick the AP classes and the advanced, and those would be the ones that more academically oriented. And I mean, there's usually the people who you wonder why their parents would spend so much money to send them to [this school] when they don't do anything. Like I just don't understand, **you would think that if you were failing out every year, like having to take summer school to keep up that your parents would realize that it wasn't the right place for you.** [Emphasis added]

Although students in independent schools are expected to do well, it is not always the case. According to Christine, students self-elect their classes and in doing so, elect a path for academic success or failure. Additionally, some students opt for the harder classes while others do not. The end result, though, reveals that some students may actually fail, and as Christine suggests, some students may even fail multiple times. Her response that the school is not "the right place" for some students subscribes to the general belief that independent school students are expected to do well academically.

In fact, Stacey identifies the unmotivated students as those who stand out from the majority at RDS:

**I think that if kids aren't trying, they stand out.** If someone is, like, literally a loby or a slug and they're not putting any effort into academics whatsoever, it's weird here. And I think **its just assumed** that you're [going to] go for help if you're having trouble in a class and you're [going to] stay and talk to some teachers and you're [going to] take advantage of the opportunities and the relationships that RDS has and I think that if you aren't engaged in getting help, and you aren't engaged in working to do well in school or you're just not plain ol' getting engaged to be in the community here, that's odd.

Like Christine, Stacey makes a similar distinction between motivated and unmotivated students, attesting to the reality that *not all* independent school students are driven and motivated academically. This is even more apparent in an educational setting where

students are encouraged, if not expected, to obtain extra help, interact with teachers, and engage with the community. The general student culture of independent schools is perceived to be responsible for transmitting personal motivation, responsibility, and discipline. Simply put, all students are expected to do well. Both Stacey and Christine do not question if students have the *ability* to do well, but rather identify *motivation* as lacking; both students are assuming that every student can do well at the school.

Lastly, another advantage of attending an independent school includes the potential for future social networking. Felicia, a student on financial aid, reports how her mother repeatedly emphasizes the future career networking with other independent school students. Felicia's mom constantly tells her that:

**Those are the future business leaders...**and you're [going to] need to know them when you graduate and they're [going to] help you and [RDS is] a so much better school...**when you get a job, these people are [going to] be your friends and they're [going to] help you.** [Emphasis added]

The potential networking and social capital available from attending an independent school highlights a prominent belief that elite culture exists in this environment, where the children will likely reproduce the social statuses of their parents. That is to say, since most of the parents of RDS students can afford the tuition, high financial capital is the status quo. More importantly, Felicia's situation exemplifies the notion that independent schools socialize students into an upper-class culture, promoting friendships and connections with elite families.

### **Rejection of and Distancing from Social and Cultural Indicators of Elite Culture**

While all of the students I interviewed identified with and embraced different aspects of elite culture at RDS, they also disassociated themselves from other

characteristics of their elite culture. The following accounts demonstrate the ways in which the students interviewed identified and rejected and/or distanced themselves from particular independent school norms and expectations. The responses offered by some of the students interviewed reflected a binary relationship with respect to money; in particular, students used the “us” and “them” language and forms of expression to describe the differences established by the ever-present indicators of money at their independent school and the advantages of having money.

Amy exemplifies this as she recounts her frustrations with students who refuse to take academics seriously:

A lot of people are...intellectually immature. **A lot of people can't even seem to engage** the same type of conversation as a certain group of people here. And I don't know, **there's a lot of people** that go home, don't do any work, go to bed and go out and get trashed every single day after school. Like weekdays, everything...Like, do you ever think about turning in your homework assignment in, like seriously. [Some students'] parents don't care [that they don't do well in classes]. **They have like, D's.** You know, the school is not that hard. It is not hard to do worksheets and turn them in. And I think that's when it comes down to a respect issue for the teachers. **Like a lot of people aren't respectful** because they really don't care, and I think that a lot of that has to do with the fact that **we have so much money that they don't care.** [Emphasis added]

Amy emphatically makes a connection between respect and students' performance in the classrooms. Her major complaint is that “a lot” of students fail to respect even the arguably minimal requirements of some classes. While these students consequently receive mediocre or bad grades (“D's”), their nonchalant response indicates to Amy that “they really don't care.” But to “not care” requires that the students have something else: “so much money.” While she includes herself in the group that has “so much money,” she solidifies the distinction between her and the non-caring students because unlike

them, she respects the academics and does the required work. Amy's comment suggests that she believes having money affects the way some students may justify and/or explain their lack of respect and/or concern toward the academic requirements.

Amy also adds that a major characteristic of RDS is that "It's not so much like public school where people don't graduate...people graduate here." According to Amy, students who do not comply with the minimum standards (such as completing a worksheet) still manage to graduate from the independent school. Statistically, this point makes sense, as it would reflect negatively on any school if students do not pass courses and/or graduate. Therefore, passing and graduating students serves to ensure a positive image for the school. Since some students attend independent schools simply because their parents can afford the tuition, it does not appear to be an expectation, nor is it mandatory, that every single independent school student put in the time, effort, and dedication necessary to achieve academic success. This idea points to a contradictory reality of the independent school culture: the types of students that supposedly attend such institutions are *not* all smart and/or hardworking.

Similarly, Brenda observes that some students may not care about classes they take during the traditional school-year because they can afford summer school. At RDS, students can attend summer school and repeat a course they have failed, or they may re-enroll in certain courses to replace an existing low grade. While summer school seems like an opportunity to boost students' grades, it also requires additional fees to be paid, as summer school tuition can range between \$1,000 and \$2,000 (depending on the number of semesters enrolled). Brenda, a student receiving financial aid, believes that:

Usually when you're wealthy, you're oblivious to the hardships that you have to go through, so **they take things for granted**. Students [at RDS] are usually rich [and] **they don't really care** about school much, [they] party a lot. **They are wealthy** so they can afford summer school, **so they just don't really try**, I guess. [Emphasis added]

As Brenda suggests, some students with money ("they") are privileged with more academic opportunities to literally 'keep trying' in their quest to get passing or even better grades. Furthermore, Brenda is suggesting that those students who can afford summer school are also the ones who "don't really try." For Brenda, her observations lead her to believe that not only is summer school a privilege (since it requires tuition), but also an advantage that wealthier students take for granted. While her reflections may be colored by potential resentment towards her classmates, Brenda's observations point to a very real social privilege and cultural advantage experienced by wealthier students. Not only can students obtain better grades, but their transcripts to colleges and universities are enhanced in comparison to students who may not be able to afford summer tuition(s); such a difference has the potential for very real consequences.

For some students, money is also a prominent issue in the ways RDS responds to students breaking rules. For example, Amy expresses frustration about the students who return to the school despite *supposed* expulsion:

[P]eople get kicked out of the school for like horrible, horrible things and **they come back the next year because their parents have three kids here**. People fail out of this school and no one cares because their **parents contribute so much money**. That's just something to think about. I don't think it's a surprise. [Emphasis added]

The importance of parental financial capital is evident, where monetary contributions and donations are, at least in Amy's perception, 'buying' the student out of any trouble s/he may have caused. In a school where many families come from the upper class with high

financial capital, Amy's critiques—even if unfounded—suggest that she not only recognizes many students at RDS are wealthy, but also that some of these students' families may use that money to ensure their child's well-being despite any behavioral problems. This perspective is unlike students who receive financial aid. For example, Felicia appears to be particularly aware of the precarious nature of her enrollment. Coming from a family without high financial capital, she recounts a conversation with her mother:

[M]y moms like “if you were ever doing drugs [in school], then **you would've been in jail** [unlike other student who went to rehabilitation.]” Or like some kids had sex in the parking lot but they didn't get in trouble. Like security told the school and they're like “We can't do anything because **their parents are the main donators** or something.” [Emphasis added]

For Felicia and her mother, money (as demonstrated here in the capacity to donate) stood at the forefront to explain why students caught doing illegal acts were allowed to stay at the school. The comments made by Amy and Felicia indicate that families with high financial capital may have potentially significant advantages with respect to disciplinary issues.

Recent incidents at RDS have also introduced other opportunities for students' family financial situations to be further scrutinized. Earlier in the year, some students vandalized school property, eliciting a strict response from the administration. When the school ultimately identified the students responsible, their student accounts were charged to pay for the damages. This final punishment was made public and prompted one student, Christine, to ponder about the implications of such a solution:

**[A] lot of people...think that they can mess up and do whatever they want and then their parents will take care of it...But the whole thing**

about your account being charged? I mean I understand they have to pay for it somehow and we don't have jobs, but I thought we could do something, like have a car wash or something to raise money but it was more like people just want to forget about it and that's it. [Emphasis added]

Contrary to the school response, Christine believes that the students themselves should be held accountable. Her solution of student activism (raising money with a car wash) is a different type of response than charging students' accounts—which ultimately parents pay. According to Christine, the other students (“they”) who find privilege in their parents' money are removed or freed from issues of responsibility and culpability. In Christine's response, it is evident that for this particular scenario, access to money (as demonstrated by charging the parents via students' accounts) seemed to be more important than, for example, issues of respect and community.

Of course, the above students' accounts and reflections may not represent everyone's views, but by considering their reflections, it is possible to identify a general theme that not only emphasizes the educational advantages of elite culture, but also how some students are aware of the potential privileges that accompany having money. Most importantly, some of the students interviewed demonstrated their ability to identify such privileges and actively rejected and/or distanced themselves from those advantages.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

Independent schools are an ideal location to evaluate important aspects of elite culture. The young men and women participating in this study not only gave their personal insights and everyday experiences, but also reflections and thoughts concerning other students at their school. In his evaluation of the power elite, Mills ([1956] 2006: 64-5) notes that “education is important to the formation of the upper-class man or woman.” Furthermore, private schools select and train new members of the “upper stratum...transmitting the traditions of the upper social classes” (Mills ([1956] 2006: 65). In addition, Mills states that “it is by means of these schools more than by any other single agency that...[families] become members of a self-conscious upper class.” In effect, upper class students’ educational attainment affirms and (re)produces an upper class culture. For the students in this study, their self-consciousness is key to understanding the ways cultural capital is learned, displayed, and reproduced in their independent school.

Independent schools’ dominant culture is that of the elite and upper class culture. As expected, members of the elite class develop a perception of their ‘place’ both in schools and greater society; this is especially the case within independent schools. There, students not only obtain particular kinds of information and knowledge through their academic coursework, but are also surrounded by a majority of others who already

belong to elite social circles. Cultural capital is present in this environment, particularly in the ways that students accept and affirm their 'place' in the independent school.

As indicated by some of the students interviewed, acceptance of their own dominance and superiority over other kinds of students and educations (specifically public school) seems inevitable with their enrollment in the independent school. For many, being elite means being 'better' than others, and the stories provided by Felicia and Brenda about speaking better English (versus Ebonics) suggest that even students who are not considered elite by their financial resources (both girls received financial aid), they considered themselves elite because of their exposure to and immersion in an elite academic and cultural institution. Consistent with prior research, possessing elite forms of cultural capital allows individuals to gain status (Dumais 2002).

Research also shows that members of the dominant class, or elites, possess the most economically and symbolically valued kinds of cultural capital which in turn result in significant life outcomes (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Individuals who lack the required cultural capital may lower their educational aspirations or choose to not enroll in higher education at all because they do not know the particular cultural norms (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977, Lamont and Lareau 1988). In effect, the amount of cultural capital an individual possesses affects the amount of educational attainment. However, the dominant culture in independent schools already *expects* students to do well academically. Furthermore, they provide an environment that fosters the attainment of higher education with the provision of excellent resource facilities such as small classes and college counselors. A possible implication of such an expectation is that members of

the elite class may view their educational inclinations as “natural,” rather than acknowledging their privileged position that fosters inclinations to lead successful lives.

Since the elite already possess certain characteristics that are revered and rewarded by society, they experience significant advantages over those who lack such information. For example, indicators of predisposition of high school students’ intentions and plans to go to college are more likely to be available and/or reinforced within independent schools. According to Hossler and Stage (1992), factors that positively correlate to college attendance include: socioeconomic status, student achievement, parental educational expectations and encouragement, high school quality, high school curriculum track, and student involvement in high school activities. As a whole, independent schools are much more likely to have higher concentrations of students possessing the aforementioned characteristics and to provide the types of education listed. Not only are independent school parents more likely to have higher incomes, but they are also making the financial sacrifice to send their children to private school. This may be an indication that the family places a higher value on their child’s education (Greene 2005). That is, by virtue of being at an independent school, students are expected to succeed. Even at RDS, it is assumed that they not only will continue their education and go to college, but also that they want to do so.

Recent exposés of college admission practices reveals that members of the upper class receive more privileges and preferences than members of other classes. Golden (2006: 5) notes that “top colleges and universities...are not wealth-blind. They take a disproportionate number of students from prep schools, and they have been known...to instruct recruiters specifically to pursue rich students.” In other words, members of the

elite class experience advantages that are directly linked to their financial wealth, including the likelihood that children will be admitted into prestigious colleges and universities. In this study, such a privilege is not much different than maintaining one's place within an independent school. According to the students, *having* or *not having* money made a difference in how students perceived their place within the independent school. At RDS, some students cited and complained about parents 'buying' their children out of disciplinary problems. In fact, one student receiving financial aid (Felicia) expressed being even more aware of how different her situation would be if she engaged in rule-breaking behaviors; for her, the result would have been jail instead of rehabilitation.

Bourdieu's ([1973] 2006) reproduction model is supported in this study, as students who come from lower social classes with less financial capital may be at a disadvantage in the independent school, whereas students with more financial capital from wealthier populations may experience certain advantages. Consistent with the findings previously presented, students' perception of place is primarily defined by the presence or absence of money. All of the students in the current study expressed an awareness of other students' financial situations, even if they did not discuss their own. In their perceptions and reflections of others, the fifteen students interviewed oftentimes employed the "us" and "them" technique to distance themselves from certain undesirable characteristics. Yet while evaluating those "other" students, everyone also revealed information about *who they were not*. Most often, disapproval seemed most prevalent for students who showcased their financial wealth by means of excessive material possessions. Nevertheless, the dominant culture of the school was based primarily on the

existence of such possessions: most students wore specific brands of clothing or carried expensive purses (i.e. Lacoste, Gucci). The members of the mainstream set the norm, and that included specific possessions and brands. Herein lies a contradiction: material possessions are “normal” at the independent school, yet to possess them in order to obtain social clout was considered unacceptable. In other words, students can and do show they have money, but they should not show off too much money.

As predicted, the experiences of students with less or limited indicators of dominant cultural capital (or with non-dominant types of cultural capital) reveals that they may experience greater challenges at the independent school (Bourdieu’s [1973] 2006). The most effective way of identifying students with non-dominant types of cultural capital was the need for financial aid in order to attend. Three students in this study received financial aid: Brenda, Felicia, and Stacey. For the RDS students interviewed receiving financial aid, challenges were both expected and unexpected. Expected challenges included the lack of clothing, accessories, and other expensive items that typified the mainstream. Unexpected challenges identified were tuition payments for summer school enrollment (particularly if students were aiming to replace an existing class grade), taking courses that required additional funding (i.e. amusement park admission tickets), and mandatory participation in school trips for which parents had to pay. Additional challenges were also identified in the ways these students thought of themselves and also how they were perceived by others.

On many accounts, these students became what Granfield (1991) described as “cultural outsiders.” Brenda considers her status as a financial aid student to be “no big deal,” but in continuing her thought it is apparent that money is the sole divider between

herself and other students. Another student, Felicia realized that although there were other Black students in her grade, social class differences prevented her from having much in common with those students; they were all wealthier than her and she could not relate to them. The students receiving financial aid experienced a cultural disadvantage because of their inability to “be like” or share similar cultural capital as the majority of students at the school. This is not suggest they are less capable students, but rather that they are forced to overcome additional challenges within their school environments.

### **Limitations**

A main limitation of this study is its inability to be applied to all types of high schools; it is, however, generalizable to similar independent schools. Additionally, the sample of students who volunteered in this study may reflect a particular “kind” of student. That is, these students had a common interest in taking the time to share their everyday experiences with a stranger; not surprisingly, most were supportive of the institution. Although most students did at some point share critical and sometimes negative stories about the school, virtually all were generally happy about being a student at the Rosetta Day School and felt as though they were part of the community.

Future research could better expose the potential financial burdens of sending children to private schools. A broader study comparing the experiences of students who receive financial aid versus those who do not could point to more generalizable results that could better equip schools to serve their student populations. In doing so, both private and public schools could better understand students’ life situations by taking into account the financial resources available to all students. In this study, I consciously decided to not ask the students about the specific details of their financial situations. A

general sense of each student's financial capital was gathered from asking for parent's occupations and whether they received financial aid. No official records were obtained from the school to confirm and/or deny students' self-reports.

Lastly, although a small percentage of independent school students receive financial aid (20.6%), it does not mean that all students who pay full tuition are wealthy and/or among the upper class. It is presumable that many families are making significant sacrifices to send their child(ren) to independent schools around the country, perhaps even driving some of them below comfortable living situations. This is a limitation of using financial aid as a primary indicator of social class.

Future research may also want to explore how these students' teachers talk about cultural capital. In this study, I show that students' understandings of cultural capital are related to the things that they perceive are most valued by their peers (e.g. the kinds of clothes they buy and wear). This is understandable because students are often highly concerned with how their peers perceive them. These displays of cultural capital however, may or may not be the same forms of cultural capital that are rewarded by teachers in the independent day school environment. Interviews with teachers would be able to reveal whether the types of cultural capital which students think are important are different than the types of cultural capital which teachers think are important.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

It is often the case that social scientists focus on and study populations that are in some way disadvantaged, such as people of color, the poor, or the disabled. It is not as common to obtain access to the individuals who are considered the most powerful and/or privileged. This study helps to fill this gap, allowing us to learn from a population that is considered to be among the most privileged. The goal of this section is to apply the lessons learned from this study to consider how social class, education, and cultural capital intersect to reveal more about the world in which we live. There were three main questions I had to guide me in this endeavor: How do individual students understand and reflect on their everyday experiences at such privileged institutions? In what ways do independent school students display and legitimate students' social class? How is cultural capital demonstrated and reproduced?

Indicators of cultural capital are most evident in the students' self-awareness of their privileged positions as independent school students. That is, they recognize and accept their access to a privileged education and expect a successful future. Having a lot of money results in the acquisition of certain tastes and affinities which results in high cultural capital. In the independent school setting, access to such a privileged education comes coupled with the fact that some students, if not most, have a lot of money. An unexpected finding of this study—and one that is most prominent—is the prevalence of

students' disapproval or hatred of money and other indicators of wealth. The students I interviewed frequently distanced themselves from other students, and often employed a binary language of "us" and "them." This is particularly prevalent in their thoughts regarding other students who overly displayed their money and wealth. Yet this seems to be contradictory as materialism seems to be a notable and taken-for-granted characteristic of U.S. society, especially in an independent school.

In general, the United States is a materialistic country, where having "stuff" is important to the ways in which individuals present themselves on a daily basis. If we consider the kinds of clothing people wear, the cars they drive, and the houses they own, as a whole we live in a culture that values possessions—especially expensive ones. The students I interviewed at the Rosetta Day School have contradicting reflections about this. For the students at RDS, money is constantly present in their everyday experiences. Even if their families do not have money, they see money and other indicators of wealth at their school. Still, most students interviewed expressed a kind of disdain, if not hatred, against those who had access to material things. Tied to this was not only the recognition, but also the disapproval of, some of the advantages and privileges that may come with financial wealth—such as the interviewed students' perceptions that some do not take school seriously or parents "buying" children out of disciplinary problems. Yet some of these same students with these complaints went on with their everyday lives enjoying some of the comforts and privileges of having money, such as hiring private language tutors or private college counselors. Even with students' disapproval of some privileges related to wealth, they still received and accepted other advantages.

This contradictory feeling towards having money—of hating its advantages on the one hand, but also accepting them on the other—has the potential for serious social implications. For some of the students interviewed, consciously distancing themselves from money may ultimately reflect a general distancing from the responsibilities of having money. A possible implication is that all independent school students, even those with low financial capital, are learning how to think about money in their participation within an upper class education. After all, it is a political statement to claim that “having money is evil,” or that “it is wrong for parents to buy their child out of trouble.” But the real concern is that simply distancing oneself from those advantages and privileges does not mean they do not take place. In fact, it is already an embedded and accepted part of elite culture. The students may criticize financial wealth all they want, but it does not change the fact that it is omnipresent. The bottom line is that students at independent schools, no matter what their financial situations, must not only recognize their position in an elite culture, but also accept their responsibility to those who are not a part of that elite culture. Being exposed to social and educational hierarchies, students may simply accept that inequality is normal and inevitable.

In this study, fifteen students shared self-conscious reflections, thoughts, and perceptions of themselves and others in an independent school. As previously mentioned, independent schools are ideal locations to evaluate the importance and prevalence of elite culture in our society, especially considering the historical and social importance of such schools and their graduates. This study demonstrates that indicators of cultural capital matter for *all* students in independent school, especially taking into account the important role money plays in such an environment—money is always present. Ultimately,

indicators of cultural capital are greatly impacted by the *presence* or *absence* of money, creating significant advantages and privileges for wealthy individuals.

Since all students are immersed in a culture that is constantly characterized by patterns and expectations of upper class elite culture, all students must negotiate their sense of ‘place’ at such a school. The students interviewed at RDS seem to have developed a contradictory relationship to money—while they recognize and accept the elite culture and its advantages, they also reject and distance themselves from some of those elite indicators.

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## Appendices

**Appendix 1: Contact/Flyer Sheet**

**CALLING ALL JUNIORS AND SENIORS!!!**

You are volunteering to participate in an informal interview that will allow you to share what it is like being an independent day school student! This project is being conducted *independently* of (School Name), and your participation will be kept confidential.

You will meet with Diana Torres for an individual interview that will last about an hour. I will meet with you at the school, a local coffee shop, or even in your home (provided an adult guardian is present). Most important, I will make the meeting time convenient for your schedule!

Please note that I will not be able to conduct interviews during the class day, however. All interviews must be completed by December 10<sup>th</sup>.

*\*\*\*Participating will automatically enter you into a raffle, where the prize is one \$75 gift certificate to a store or charity of your choice!\*\*\**

To participate in this exciting research opportunity, please follow these three easy steps:

1. **Complete the form below and return it to Diana today.** This form will provide your contact information as well as enter you for the \$75 raffle (provided you are interviewed).
2. **Get a copy of a parental consent form.** This form **MUST** be signed by your parent(s) if you are under the age of 18; you can not be interviewed without parental consent.
3. **Schedule an interview day/time/place.** Diana will contact you within the next few days to schedule the interview. Remember to bring the signed consent form to the interview!

Remember, this is a University of South Florida graduate school project. If you have any questions, please contact Diana directly at [phone number] or at [e-mail address].

*Please forward this information to any of your junior and senior friends} who may be interested! All they have to do is e-mail me directly to get started...*

-----  
(tear here)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Grade: \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone number: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix 2: Interview Questions**

### Background

Tell me a little about yourself...how would you describe who you are?  
What about your home life. Parents? Siblings?  
What did you do this past summer?  
Tell me about your educational history—what schools have you attended and for how long?  
When did you start at (school)?  
Why did you decide to apply to (school)?  
Did your parents attend (school), or a school like it?  
What does your family think about you attending this school?

### Everyday Life

How do you get to/from school?  
What classes are you taking?  
Which one is your favorite and why?  
Which one is your least favorite and why?  
Are you involved in any extra curricular activities?  
Do you work for pay outside of (school)?  
How do you balance your commitments?  
Describe a typical day at (school) for you.  
What kinds of students attend (school)?  
Are there cliques? If so, what are they?  
Tell me about your friends at (school).  
What is your life like outside of (school)—do you hang out with other (school) students?  
What do you share in common with your friends?  
What do you do for fun with your friends?  
What do other (school) students do for fun?  
What are some of the issues you and your friends face at this school, if any?  
Have you ever argued with any other students, or just did not get along?  
    What happened?  
Is there anything that makes you upset or angry at (school)?  
Do you have any stories that best demonstrate your experience at (school).  
If you could change anything about the students, what would change about your fellow students?  
    Faculty and staff?  
    Friends?  
    Facilities?

### Thoughts

Describe the “typical” students at this school. How do students usually look—clothing, appearance, behavior, etc.? What’s the whole package like?  
What you do think makes some students stand out from the majority at (school)?  
In your opinion, what’s the typical experience as a student here?

## Appendix 2: (Continued)

Is there anything that can prevent students from being accepted by other students at this school?

What is the best part about being a student here?

What is the worst part?

Do you think there any students who have an advantage when it comes to doing well in school?

Who are they and what do they have as an advantage?

When you look around (school), do you think there is there diversity at this school? You can define diversity however you want to...

Do you feel that you are a part of the community here?

### Future

Where do you see yourself in 5 years?

How does (school) play a role in that?

### Basic Demographic Information

Age

Race/Ethnicity

Do you receive any form of financial aid?    YES                    NO

Where we you born?

Do you have any siblings?    YES                    NO

If yes, how old are they and what school do they attend?

Parent's Occupations:

Parents Marital Status:

Who do you live with?