Girl Power, Boy Power, Class Power: Class and Gender Reproduction in Elite Single-Gender Private Schools

by

Jayne Baker

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to our understanding of the role of elite single-gender schools in the reproduction of class and gender inequalities. This is an ethnographic study of an all-boys and all-girls school in the Toronto area, combining participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and web and print school documents. I focused especially on students in their final year of high school, when the potential advantages embedded within a private school are most likely to be capitalized on. The data provide an opportunity highlight three mechanisms of class and gender reproduction. First, I explore the teacher/student relationship as a source of advantage for students and show how teachers are complicit in these negotiations. I make sense of this in the context of the schools’ belief in the importance of educating the whole child, including traits like leadership, and the university prep focus of these schools. Second, I focus on how school personnel understand their students as gendered subjects and the contradiction this presents at the all-girls school, where administrators are keen on students defying stereotypes but draw on many of those stereotypes to develop best practices at the school. Third, I analyze the university choice process of these students, noting especially how they construct distinctions between Canadian universities despite Canada not having a steep and well-known hierarchy between institutions, and how they use the established hierarchies in other countries. I bring
together theories on the correspondence between the economic structure and the education system and the role of culture in reproduction, staying mindful of how these educational settings are structured and what is happening in the classroom, including how students shape their educational experiences through their actions and their interactions with others, especially teachers.
Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Elite private schools have long captivated the attention of the general public, journalists, and academics alike. They serve a population that is unique in its privilege; they have historically had close ties to elite universities, ties that advantage their students; they are known to be a soup of social networks; their curriculum is seen as advanced, sophisticated, and challenging; and they are closed organizations, and therefore mysterious and fascinating. They are particularly interesting to sociologists because of their role in reproducing advantage for the children of the most privileged and well connected elites (political, business, and economic). Reproducing advantage is one side of the coin of the reproduction of inequality, and exploring the relationship between schooling and inequality has been one important focus in the sociology of education. Countless sociologists of education have established the role of schools in reproducing inequality, countering the idea that schools teach technical skill, reward the most talented students, and provide an opportunity for the elimination of social inequality. Broadly speaking, sociologists have looked at the type of school, student experience within school walls—from the high school tracks they are channeled through to the ways that teachers interact differently with students of different backgrounds and genders—and family culture, among others, in their exploration of the link between schooling and inequality. The research scope has been large, covering a broad range of topics and drawing on different methodologies. It has, to some extent, included a range of student, family, and school types in the analysis, but has tended to be more heavily weighted toward the study of working-class and middle-class populations. The literature on the more privileged segment of our society—those you will find in all schools but particularly in elite private schools—tends to be smaller in size. One result of this is that we
have relatively less information on the kinds of processes or mechanisms that might contribute to privileged students having better educational achievement and attainment. We know that privileged students tend to have higher grades, ambitious aspirations, attend top-tier universities, and so on, but we have less detailed understanding of the process that leads to some of these outcomes in comparison to our knowledge of working-class students. The smaller set of literature on exclusive educational settings like private schools also tend to focus on coeducational or all-male school environments; the result of this is a significant silence on girls’ experiences in a privileged single-gender environment and a lack of comparison of all-boys’ and all-girls’ private school environments.

Through the research described in this thesis, I contribute to our understanding of reproduction among the more privileged segment of society. My analysis centres on single-gender elite private schools in Toronto—Girl High and Boy High—and draws on interviews with key figures within the school and a small number of students, months of participant observation, and a multitude of printed and web school documents. I carefully look at the ways that elite single-gender schools contribute to the reproduction of class and gender inequalities. By highlighting some of the different aspects of the elite single-gender environment—from university counselling to classroom interaction—I demonstrate the usefulness of considering gender and class in an analysis of the school. Throughout, I bear in mind what is happening at the organizational level—how these exclusive educational settings are structured—and what is happening in the classroom—how the students experience their schooling, actively participate in and shape their education, and capitalize on the advantages before them.

Through my analysis, I explore three mechanisms of gender and class reproduction evident at Girl High and Boy High. First, I demonstrate the opportunity for advantage embedded
within the teacher-student relationship. Students stand to benefit in a number of ways by negotiating with their teachers over their education—most visibly in terms of grade manipulation that happens in advance of university applications. Part of what makes this even possible is the institutional emphasis on leadership, rooted in the schools’ “whole child” philosophy of education. In settings where requesting special accommodations in the classroom is seen as a sign of leadership, students have an opportunity to capitalize on their relationship with teachers and “earn” higher grades. Second, in exploring how these institutions understand their students as gendered individuals, I highlight how girls are encouraged to challenge and defy gender stereotypes in a quest to overcome gender inequality, while they are simultaneously taught via many of these same stereotypes. The reproduction of gender, in this case, is rooted in class privilege and students lack a structural understanding of gender inequality. Instead, it is simply up to the girls to carve their own path, taking advantage of the many opportunities that await them beyond the walls of Girl High. This demonstrates the importance of bearing in mind both social class and gender in an analysis centred on single-gender elite private schools. Third, I highlight how Girl High and Boy High students sort themselves into exclusive institutions in a country (Canada) not known for a steep institutional hierarchy. I demonstrate how students and their families construct a hierarchy from among a set of otherwise similar Canadian universities, and the factors underlying these preferences. The constructed hierarchy is largely supported by Girl High and Boy High administrators even though it often contradicts their belief in the importance of ‘fit’.

In the sections that follow, I trace the most significant sociological theorizing on how schooling contributes to the reproduction of class and gender inequality. I begin by highlighting the dominant theoretical frameworks rooted in a Marxist tradition, beginning with work on the
correspondence between the economic structure and the education system, moving to social reproduction theory, and finally resistance literature, all centred on class reproduction. Second, I discuss the feminist contribution, which pushed the study of reproduction in new directions. This leads to a discussion of single-gender schooling, which is often lauded as a solution to classroom inequalities for both boys and girls. I draw on insights from gender and education literatures regarding the role of the institution and, in particular, the importance of understanding the gender regime (Connell 1987) and how some institutional contexts can reinforce gender boundaries that might otherwise be less salient in the everyday (Messner 2000; Thorne 1993). Literature that relates specifically to one particular chapter can be found within that chapter.

SCHOOLS AS SITES OF SOCIAL CLASS REPRODUCTION

The idea that schools are sites of the reproduction of advantage and disadvantage, and thus part of the perpetuation of class inequality, is central in the sociology of education. Bowles and Gintis’ *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) was an early and influential contribution to the emerging study of the role of schools in reproducing inequality. *Schooling in Capitalist America* counters functionalist arguments about the socialization functions of schools and is instead grounded in a Marxist understanding of the economic structure of society. Bowles and Gintis frame their analysis in terms of the futility of educational reform if the overarching capitalist system is not also reformed. At the root of Bowles and Gintis’ argument is the notion that the school system reproduces and legitimates inequality through a correspondence between the social relations of the school and the workplace, specifically the alienation, hierarchy, and fragmentation common to production and experienced by working-class labourers (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Schools teach students to be subordinate and fragmented in consciousness,
attributes valued under capitalism, by rewarding and penalizing character traits such as predictability (awarded) and creativity (penalized). Teachers and administrators do not consciously reproduce the social relations of capitalism in their schools; rather, it is simply that the relationships of authority, control, and hierarchy common in the capitalist economic structure are mirrored in the classroom. Alienation is evident in the lack of student control over curriculum and the emphasis on external rewards (grades) instead of a closer involvement with the process of learning. Fragmentation is evident in competition and classroom rankings of student ability. Hierarchy is evident in the relationship between teacher and student. Authority and control are held by teachers, and not shared with students.

Schools serving a wealthier segment of the population are quite different. However, Bowles and Gintis skew their analysis heavily toward working-class populations, focusing on how future labourers—presumably those with less economic power—are created through the education system. Their somewhat lopsided analysis is evident throughout Schooling in Capitalist America in language like “students are reconciled to their social positions” (106) and “[t]hrough the educational encounter, individuals are induced to accept the degree of powerlessness with which they will be faced as mature workers” (265; emphases mine). Bowles and Gintis provide very little analysis of more privileged educational settings—schools in “well-to-do suburbs” (132)—but suggest that these schools favour greater student participation, less direct supervision, more student electives, and a value system stressing internalized standards of control (Bowles and Gintis 1976:132). Bowles and Gintis spend much less time trying to describe some of these differences and how it might relate to the ‘well-to-do’ children’s futures; they only suggest that the type of schooling just described is the preference of high-status parents and a reflection of the parents’ position in the labour market. A more comprehensive description
of these practices within schools in wealthier neighbourhoods is borne out in subsequent research done by Anyon (1980, 1981) who finds schools in affluent neighbourhoods emphasize individuality, creativity, reason, abstract learning, and hands-on experience (Anyon 1980, 1981). These skills are necessary, Anyon argues, for the kinds of jobs the students should anticipate based on their class position, namely professional positions involving ownership and control of capital.

Conceptualizing a relationship between the social relations of the workplace and the school is an important idea, and one that I draw on through much of this analysis. In Chapter 2, I connect the “whole child” philosophy that informs practice at Boy High and Girl High to what is envisioned for these students upon their graduation. At the heart of this is leadership; there is no mistaking that Boy High and Girl High students will be leaders in their chosen field. I return to these ideas again in Chapter 4, where the work/school model outlined by Bowles and Gintis is crucial to understanding the students’ interactions with their teachers and the degree of control they enjoy over their educational experience and outcomes.

The correspondence principle at the heart of this structural framework has been critiqued as functionalist and deterministic. For example, MacLeod (1995) calls the correspondence principle economically deterministic because Bowles and Gintis root their discussion in a Marxian analysis of class, which cannot account for any within-class differences. *Schooling in Capitalist America* reflects the time in which it was written, as indicated by the lack of acknowledgement that power and privilege are unequally distributed according to race, gender, age, etc., and not just class (Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Arnot 1994). Additionally, many point to the absence of individual agency in the correspondence principle; how do individuals actually respond to structures? As set out by Bowles and Gintis, outcomes are pre-defined, there is no
room for non-conformity, and individuals are passive role-bearers (MacLeod 1995; Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Jones 1989).

While Bowles and Gintis’ work has been criticized as functionalist, the notion of a correspondence between the education system and students’ occupational paths remains an influential argument. In that vein, Cookson and Persell’s (1985) *Preparing for Power*, a study of the processes within elite private boarding schools in the United States, is rich in detail and extends our understanding of the relationship between school and the economic structure among the more privileged. It contributes to the mostly British literature on the elite boarding school experience (see for example Evans 1991; Leeson 1948; Wakeford 1969; Wilkinson 1964). *Preparing for Power* brought attention to a set of North American organizations that otherwise would remain mysterious. Their analysis focuses most heavily on data from a smaller subsection of elite boarding schools (notably none of them girls’ school, a point I return to later). They argue that elite boarding schools are “total institutions” that mold the identities of students, building and shaping a classed identity. *Preparing for Power* details many ways that elite schools are central to the reproduction of the elite through the socialization of students into full-fledged members of the privileged class. Among other things, they note the sacrifices (male) students make to secure membership in the elite, such as extended periods of time away from their family, limits to their personal freedom, and routine surveillance of their activities. Cookson and Persell view the elite boarding school as a “status seminary”, an important tool of the elite who wish to reproduce class advantage. These schools mold students into graduates who are ready to take their place among the elite, especially in business and politics. Elite boarding schools engender attitudes expected of a group of graduates foreseen to go on to

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1 Bowles and Gintis have responded to these critiques (2002, 2003) and take particular issue with the functionalist criticism levelled against their work, arguing that some aspects of their argument were misinterpreted.
greatness. By doing things like exposing their students to the famous, powerful grads that have come before them—like Choate’s anniversary celebrants who were treated to an impassioned speech from John F. Kennedy about the impact school alumni could have on the nation’s political scene—the schools teach their students more than the three R’s. Elite boarding schools prepare their students for power, the power they will take up by virtue of their family background. This work is important because it draws attention to processes of socialization rather than assuming they are there, and is mindful of both the organization and what happens within the classroom.

However, *Preparing for Power* neglects to incorporate much detail on the students’ experiences or really capture the nature of the elite boarding school classroom, focusing more heavily on the structure of the institution, profiles of the headmasters and teachers, and developing their argument that elite boarding schools are “total institutions.” The implication of this is a limited sense of some of the detailed processes that concretely produce advantage and a lack of evidence that students are doing anything but passively accepting the school’s efforts around socialization. In the face of an overwhelming focus on the institution and without integration of students’ voices, *Preparing for Power* at times reads in a deterministic way.

For Bowles and Gintis, the correspondence between the relations in the school system and the relations within the work world is the important connection while, for Cookson and Persell, the molding of a classed identity within the walls of the elite boarding school is what most contributes to the reproduction of advantage. The risk is that this way of understanding elite reproduction can often ring of socialization and not much else, as suggested by Maxwell and Maxwell about private schooling in Canada: “…for the upper classes it has been assumed that success is the norm, that there is relative ease in reproduction, that the process is
uncomplicated, that status maintenance is the outcome, and that downward mobility does not occur” (1995a:323). Students enter a school—working class or elite—and come out in the same class position, having been sorted on the basis of their family class background. For this reason, this line of theorizing that focuses on socialization into roles is considered by many to be deterministic. In my analysis, I build on the tradition of analyzing the connections between the social relations of work and the social relations of the education system, in this case in terms of an education system designed for the privileged. But I also build on work in the sociology of education intent on both challenging the determinism embedded in theories like the correspondence principle and bringing in a focus on the students. Enhancing our understanding of class reproduction is the literature that goes inside the classroom and looks at individuals as actors that shape their educational experiences and outcomes. Much of this work is qualitative, and it highlights the power of culture in class reproduction.

* Bringing Culture in, Bringing in the Actor *

Work in the sociology of education that explores the connection between culture and class reproduction is within the theoretical tradition of Marxist work like Bowles and Gintis’ *Schooling in Capitalist America*. However, instead of focusing on the economic structure of society, cultural reproduction theorists highlight the central importance of culture to class reproduction. Perhaps the most well-known theoretical work on the role of culture in class reproduction is that of Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu’s analysis is marked by an interest in how privileged groups stay privileged, how people unwittingly reproduce class inequalities through their choices, and how these choices are informed by their position within the class structure (Bourdieu 1974; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Habitus is at the root of these choices, albeit in
an unconscious way, as a system of dispositions or worldview that affects everyday practice. Rooted in our social class background, it constitutes the basis of how we understand our social world and make decisions, oftentimes unconsciously. Bourdieu analyzes culture as a form of capital, a potential resource that can be exchanged and potentially used to gain advantage. Bourdieu moves away from a model of natural aptitude or ability towards the notion of the distribution of educational credentials according to the “hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (1986:244). Much of his work discusses how the various aspects of culture, such as food, dress, and music, are indicative and constitutive of class position.

Bourdieu argues the school plays a part in reproducing advantage (and disadvantage) by rewarding the cultural capital of the middle-class. Most class reproduction strategies happen via the education system (Bourdieu 1984). The strategies privileged parents invoke in their children’s schooling are intended to maintain their class position and combat devaluation of qualifications as competition in higher education increases (Bourdieu 1986). Enrolling your child in an elite private school, for example, could be considered a reproduction strategy, intended to ensure that your child has the best chances of success in both educational achievement and attainment.

Furthermore, the education system itself is a reflection of social class, as the dominant class has the power to impose their standards and practices onto the education system (Lareau and Weininger 2003). As noted in one of his most influential texts, “the hidden services [the education system] renders to certain classes by concealing social selection under the guise of technical selection and legitimating the reproduction of the social hierarchies by transmuting them into academic hierarchies” is a central facet of reproduction (Bourdieu 1974; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977:153). In this way, the education system maintains the appearance of legitimacy.

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2 See Kingston (2001) for a critique of cultural capital in the sociology of education.
and neutrality even though it rewards cultural capital overwhelmingly possessed by those in more privileged social class positions (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). In other words, the school itself reflects and rewards the cultural capital of those in relatively privileged social classes but maintains the appearance of neutrality because it promotes an achievement ideology centered on hard work, motivation, and ability.

Bourdieu’s work has been enormously influential in the sociology of education, including the study of elite school settings. It is important in my analysis for three reasons: first, the cultural reproduction framework urges us to consider the ways that individuals possess culture—among their friends, and from their families—as well as the ways this culture may serve as a source of advantage. This especially informs my analysis in Chapter 4, where I explore how students taking control of their education emerges from their family background, as a kind of entitlement (Lareau 2003). Second, seeing educational institutions as influenced by those in more privileged social classes is crucial to understanding some aspects of the elite private school. After all, these schools serve a particular market of parents who are willing to pay for a certain kind of education, and the schools remain largely accountable to parents. Related, the idea of “organizational habitus” is implicit through the chapters to follow. Organizational or institutional habitus is the impact of a particular cultural or social group on an institution, shaping the way an institution “acts and reacts” (Horvat and Antonio 1999:318; McDonough 1997). It is the influence of an external element like social class on an organization. I use this idea to understand times when the parents’ influence on the schools seem apparent (particularly in the university choice process) and, most especially, to contextualize many features of the school, such as the “whole child” philosophy and the university-prep focus, both discussed in the chapter to follow (Chapter 2). Third, I use the cultural reproduction framework to explore higher
education decision-making at Boy High and Girl High, in Chapter 6. I discuss the theoretical framework more fully in that chapter but, in short, the central idea is how choice is informed by and a reflection of social class. Bourdieu’s work helps illuminate how some of the factors informing university choice among Boy High and Girl High students go beyond mere preferences and are, instead, manifestations of social class.

Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction framework primarily centres on the culture that emerges from one’s family social class background. Other work in the sociology of education brings the cultural analysis to youth, exploring how youth culture is connected to the reproduction of social class. Paul Willis’ (1977) work was among the first to explore how youth culture—inform ed by the economic opportunities available to graduates in the community—contributes to the reproduction of a working-class position. Learning to Labour shifted attention to the students and their lives within and outside of the school. In Willis’ work, the boys who have contempt for theoretical knowledge—the “lads”—are those who see through the achievement ideology of school (that education leads to opportunity), and resist teachers, schooling, and the academic culture. Their counter-school culture is marked by opposition to authority, lateness and absenteeism, heavy smoking and drinking, and distinctive clothing and hairstyle that run as counter to the school uniform as possible. They resist school culture, prioritizing having a “laff”, meaning having fun and being independent. Through their resistance, however, they ultimately reproduce their working class position. In contrast to the lads are the “ear’oles”, so named because they are least expressive and very passive; in a word, they are the conformists. As Willis states: “Having invested something of their own identities in the formal aims of education and support of the school institution—in a certain sense having foregone their own right to have a “laff”—they demand that teachers should at least respect the same authority” (Willis 1977:13).
Willis’ argument centres on the role of culture and specifically the working class culture of the boys in a setting with limited labour market opportunities.

Much like Willis, MacLeod (1995) looks at youth culture and how economic opportunity, community structure (including the history of racism), and the achievement ideology of schools can come together to produce resistance and conformity. MacLeod presents the “Hallway Hangers” in opposition to the “Brothers”, the former being opposed to schooling in favour of drugs, alcohol, and crime, and the latter believing in the opportunities that schooling could afford and conforming to societal expectations. They are much like Willis’ “lads” and “ear’oles.” When, years later, the Brothers fail to find educational and occupational success via their schooling, they do not blame the education system. MacLeod argues that this is the power of the achievement ideology—“[b]ecause the school deals in the currency of academic credentials, its role in the reproduction of inequality is obscured” (1995:113).

Willis and MacLeod are both in conversation with previous work by the likes of Bowles and Gintis. Their work enables us to see students as actors and class reproduction as the result of an ongoing and contested process. Together, these theoretical traditions provide a framework for thinking about social class reproduction as related to the economic structure, the educational system, and the actions and culture of individuals who interact with schools, teachers, and their peers, and help shape their educational outcomes. Willis’ and MacLeod’s work also demonstrates the purchase of getting inside the classroom and the students’ lives; with this kind of research approach it becomes possible to understand some of the nuanced and complex processes that contribute to social class reproduction.

A recent contribution to a cultural analysis of schooling, notable because it is one of a small handful of in-depth explorations of elite schooling, is Khan’s (2011) work on his alma
mater, St. Paul’s (an elite boarding school in New Hampshire). His is an argument about advantages embedded within culture. Bourdieu’s framework rests on the idea of an “elite culture”, but Khan is able to show how culture more generally, especially cultural omnivorousness, can be used for social advancement. St. Paul’s cultivates an ease of privilege: a sense of self, an embodiment, which serves as an advantage. The students learn to be at ease in a range of subject areas. This ease is part of the “trick” of privilege—it makes the hierarchies seem natural and meritocratic. Khan finds the students of St. Paul’s believe in hard work and the American Dream. The students regard hierarchies as obstacles that can be overcome, or ladders to be climbed. They speak in terms of meritocracy, not necessarily recognizing the advantages embedded within their elite school, such as the opportunity to develop “meritorious traits” (Khan 2011:9). Traits that are meritorious are those that most align with our idea of meritocracy. This might include a student who seems to possess a lot of drive and talent, or shows a lot of initiative. These are the qualities that seem a product of effort and natural ability but are actually markers of privilege. The idea of meritorious traits is an important contribution because it connects the work of the schools—creating opportunities for students to develop and be rewarded for seemingly natural traits like talent—with the students’ belief in meritocracy and the invisibility of privilege. Meritorious traits are woven throughout each of the analysis chapters, the most important trait being leadership, discussed in Chapter 2. By looking in the classroom in detail, Khan’s work builds on the likes of Willis (1977) and MacLeod (1995) by detailing the agency among a decidedly different kind of population—privileged boys attending an exclusive school.

ACKNOWLEDGING GENDER: GENDER REPRODUCTION IN SCHOOLS
The correspondence principle, cultural reproduction theory, and resistance theory are all important theories in the sociology of education. At the same time, they all pay insufficient—or none at all—attention to gender. They typically assume a male student who will go on to participate in the paid labour market. They fail to use a gendered analysis in their discussions of the student experience of schooling. And they generally fail to include females in their analysis; female students are on the periphery or absent altogether. In this section, I highlight some of these absences as well as the contribution of feminist scholars who have bridged some of these gaps.

Bowles and Gintis are altogether silent on girls; their work on the correspondence principle for the most part assumes a male, working class student and preparation for work characterized by alienation and hierarchy. And while the ‘resistance’-oriented work brought an important shift to the study of class reproduction, feminist sociologists were quick to point out that this work neglected to theorize on girls’ experiences of class reproduction and the forms of girls’ resistance. Schools distribute messages about normative gender roles in keeping with broader class inequalities (Proweller 1998), but this had remained invisible until feminist research documented girls’ experiences as classed individuals.

McRobbie (2000) was particularly important in this regard; she finds that girls were also resisting, but their resistance was different than boys. The English girls she studied opted in to a cult of femininity—with an emphasis on friendship, romance, and an exaggeration of female sexuality—and opted out of a student identity. In Canada, Gaskell (1992) traces how high school girls and boys select into schooling opportunities on the basis of perceived opportunities in the public sphere (the labour market) and presumed responsibilities in the private sphere. Despite reproducing a traditional pattern around paid and unpaid work, Gaskell also shows how
the students struggle within these opportunities and responsibilities much like Willis (1977) showed with the working-class boys in his study. The girls resist defining themselves through domesticity despite recognizing they are primarily responsible for the private sphere and understanding that domesticity is expected of females. The work of Bettie (2003) is another exemplar; she argues that girls’ social class is often invisible despite it being centrally connected—alongside race, sexuality, and gender—to how girls construct their identities. What is important about the work of McRobbie, Gaskell, and others highlighting the experience of women is that gender is at the centre of the analysis. In particular, these pieces compare class reproduction among men and women, thus acknowledging that women also possess a social class background and experience education through their relative advantage or disadvantage.

This shift in analysis led many sociologists of education to turn their attention to the ways that gender inequality is reproduced via the education system. Less centrally concerned with class reproduction, these researchers were more interested in documenting the ways that the education system contributed to ongoing gender inequality. The longstanding concern was that gender-role stereotypes were being taught and modelled in schools, shaping children’s eventual gender identities and contributing to gender inequality (Arnot 1983). A significant amount of research emerged showing teachers unconsciously gave preferential treatment to boys over girls in the classroom; others explored the effects of this unequal treatment, such as differences in confidence levels in schooling (see especially AAUW 1992, Orenstein 1994; Sadker and Sadker 1994). Researchers uncovered a long chain of educational processes with implications for girls’ futures, from different parental expectations that vary by the gender of the child to student’s field of study choices in higher education that follow gender stereotypes.

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3 I discuss this literature in much greater detail in Chapter 5, particularly as it relates to the mandate of single-gender schooling for girls.
Much like the broader sociology of education literature, the smaller literature on elite schools is also relatively silent on girls’ experiences. *Preparing for Power* surveys the US private school system but neglects girls’ schools. Their analysis focuses most heavily on what Cookson and Persell call “The Select 16”: a set of 16 elite boarding schools that stand out due to their long history of educating children of the most elite and significant families in the US. In focusing on this elite sub-group, their work effectively excludes any girls’ elite boarding schools. Girls’ schools are simply one more category in their larger survey of the private education landscape, such as ‘Episcopalian’ or ‘military’. Among the “Select 16”, none are all-girls schools; two were originally coeducational schools, one institution has always been all-boys, while the remaining 13 schools began as all-boys and converted to coeducation typically in the 1970s. That this group comprises the “Select 16” reflects the belief of the relative importance of boys’ and girls’ private schools; the majority of elite boarding schools have historically served the educational needs of boys. Elite schools also historically prepared boys and girls for very different lives. While boys were prepared for admission to a top university (and thus a career), women were generally prepared for lives focused on volunteering, social commitments, and family (Cookson and Persell 1985). Gender is evidently present in *Preparing for Power*, but a gendered analysis is absent. For example, the authors discuss how private boarding schools provide leadership training and develop class consciousness: involvement with student government (which also leads to liaisons with school administration), competition, pressure, learning for its own sake, and the Socratic method of teaching/learning are all part of ‘preparing for power’. The authors state that these elements are less pronounced in girls’ schools because the purpose of boys’ and girls’ education is distinct. Thus, gender is obviously a factor, but the authors do not analyze their observations with gender in mind.
More generally, very little sociological attention in North America has been paid to elite girls’ schools as purveyors or conduits of the reproduction of social class advantage or detailed some of the ways that elite girls’ schools might contribute to the reproduction of gender inequality. Proweller’s (1998) work on girls’ identity formation is the result of her research within an all girl’s private school setting. Her work illustrates how female identities are constructed through the intersecting axes of race, class, and gender. However, Proweller is less concerned with the reproduction of class privilege. In a Canadian example, Maxwell and Maxwell (1994) discuss elite schooling, including coeducational and girls’ private schools. They find that, by the third of three decades in which they surveyed private schools ending in 1986, the majority of female students selected high-status and male-dominated occupations (such as business) as their ideal and expected occupations and rated ‘career’ as their expected major source of life satisfaction. Maxwell and Maxwell conclude that women attending these schools would not be reproducing a sex-segregated labour force in the future, instead entering into previously ‘male’ careers (see also Maxwell and Maxwell 1995a). Their conclusions suggest that female students attending elite private schools challenge longstanding trends documenting female students selection of fields of studies and careers that follow gender stereotypes, like nursing and teaching. As Maxwell and Maxwell did not follow-up with the women in their study, it is not known whether these students ultimately selected occupations aligned with their rankings.

Overall, there is a paucity of literature on elite girls’ class and gender reproduction; most of the in-depth research on private schools is skewed towards the male experience. Because of this relative silence on elite girls’ schools and girls’ experiences within elite schools—coeducational or single-gender—we know considerably less about girls’ experiences of class
reproduction such as that provided by McRobbie and Gaskell. We have far fewer examples of research that explores both class and gender reproduction in elite schools, especially elite girls’ schools, that is equivalent to the work of McRobbie and Gaskell’s research on working class students.

Chapter 5 takes up these issues most directly. First, I include an analysis of gender at the same time as class. Since the time of Cookson and Persell’s research, there have been significant changes in relation to the opportunities available to men and women. Girls can now anticipate a different kind of future than could the girls educated during the time of Cookson and Persell’s data collection (the early 1980s). As women have gained ground in universities and workplaces, girls’ schools have increasingly pitched themselves as central to the development of confidence, breaking down gender inequality, and engendering empowerment. We know relatively little about contemporary single-gender schools. Most work on elite schools focus on coeducational environments. Comparative research on boys’ and girls’ schools has not been particularly in-depth, focusing mainly on academic outcomes. As Connell et al. (1982) remark, it is not enough to consider how a private school serves largely the ruling class, or that student X attends an all-girls school; “the fact that it [the private school] is both is important in understanding most facets of it” (180, my emphasis). My analysis takes this point seriously and, at all times, keeps both class and gender in mind.

Single-gender Schooling

In the face of concerns and criticisms over girls’ experiences in school, single-gender schools are often held up as a solution to the failures of the school system to adequately address the needs of boys and girls equally. This literature often focuses narrowly on whether there are
benefits to attending a single-gender institution measured in terms of academic outcomes like math achievement scores. I discuss this literature more fully in Chapter 5. What is theoretically important about single-gender schools is that they are structured by gender separation and draw on cultural ideas about a gender binary—male and female.

The work on gender separation among boys and girls has demonstrated how gender becomes particularly salient in certain contexts, particularly institutional contexts like coeducational schools. Thorne (1993) shows how children play with the boundaries of gender, oftentimes heavily enforcing the boundaries at school while other times playing in a more gender-integrated manner, such as in their neighbourhood. Boys and girls constitute themselves as different and oppositional only some of the time and in different ways, largely depending on the context. Teachers occasionally use gender to separate their students while, at other times, students police each other’s activities and enforce the boundaries between boys and girls.

Messner (2000), using his experience as a parent at a soccer ceremony, builds on this idea that the salience of gender varies across social contexts; he articulates the interplay between gender as a cultural performance, a product of social interaction, and a result of institutional constraints. That gender salience has to be understood at multiple levels of analysis certainly informs this analysis. What I draw on most particularly, however, is his thinking on the relationship between the performance or salience of gender and institutionalized sex segregation. He argues that gender sameness is difficult to recognize in institutional contexts informally structured by sex segregation, as is the soccer league. Messner looks at the gender regime—a structural inventory (Connell 1987)—of a local soccer league to contextualize a moment where gender boundaries are enacted by a group of young soccer players separated into gender-specific teams. The soccer organization (the coaches and assistants) is largely dominated by men, particularly in the top-
most positions like the Board members and coaching staff. Women are more likely to fill roles related to snacks and planning events, roles typically filled by the mothers of the players. At an institutional level, then, gender separation was typical. In this kind of a context, gender sameness is difficult to “see” (Messner 2000). As he says, no one stops to remark about how similar boys and girls are during the hundreds of moments that they are playing soccer similarly; it is when the gender boundaries are enacted that adults commit to the idea of gender difference (Messner 2000). Messner goes on to say that “[t]he formal sex segregation of children does not, in and of itself, make gender overly salient” (2000:772); it is when the children are put in the same environment that gender boundaries become strongly enacted.

What is important for this analysis is that Boy High and Girl High are designed around gender segregation. Unlike coeducational schools where gender separation happens more fluidly, partly in response to the context, single-gender schools are based on a strict separation of gendered students and a belief that these students are unique in their educational needs, because of their gender difference. I draw on Messner’s insights and examine the interplay of gender boundaries and the institutional context. After all, these are settings where gender seems particularly salient. Boys and girls may not physically be in the same environment but, in a single-gender school, the ‘opposite gender’ is always present. I return to this in Chapter 5 and again in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION

As each chapter will illustrate, reproduction happens in sometimes subtle and sometimes overt ways through the daily workings of the school, the administrators that help shape them, and as a response to the market of parents paying for a particular kind of education. I move away
from the total institution argument made by Cookson and Persell in their work on boarding schools—an influential piece of work for those doing research on any private school, boarding or not—and instead adopt the standpoint that these schools are not involved in molding identity. Instead, class and gender are reproduced through the daily happenings in the classroom and largely structured by the kinds of opportunities available through the school as well as the curriculum developed by the school. Matched by structural and cultural features of the school that reflect the resources and class background of the population they serve, this all comes together to produce environments where students are actively engaged with their schools, are given any number of opportunities to develop meritorious traits, and are supported and encouraged by their schools every step of the way.

Building on the theoretical foundations laid by the likes of Bowles and Gintis, Bourdieu, Willis, MacLeod, and Messner, I seek to capture the nuance of gender and class reproduction in two exclusive single-gender private school settings in Toronto. In particular, I explore three mechanisms of gender and class reproduction: the advantages embedded within the teacher/student relationship; how the gender binary and gender stereotypes are central organizing principles and used to engage students at the risk of reinforcing stereotypes; and the sorting of students into post secondary destinations on the basis of a constructed hierarchy of Canadian students and the deeply entrenched hierarchy in other nations.

ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION

Chapter 2 sets the stage for the analysis by providing information on each of the researched schools as well as more general contextual information, such as the history of private
schooling in Canada. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology behind the project via the literature on “studying up.”

Chapters 4 through 6 constitute the core substantive chapters. Chapter 4 looks at the student-teacher relationship as one mechanism of advantage. At a time when students are consumed with their applications to university, they show initiative in their interactions with teachers by making requests for grade adjustments and test changes, among other things. And in keeping with larger school goals around nurturing leadership qualities, and possibly also in an effort to keep their market happy, most teachers show a willingness to meet student demand for accommodation, even creating grade-earning opportunities for their students without prompting. I also highlight the ways these patterns vary by gender. Chapter 5 establishes how the gender-segregated dimension of these schools is apparent in the school culture and is woven into the everyday practices in each environment. I seek to establish two things in Chapter 5. First, I show how the schools’ conceptions of boys and girls is largely grounded in stereotypes and, second, I illustrate how this results in a contradiction at the girls school, where girls are thought of in terms of stereotypes but then encouraged to defy those same stereotypes. Chapter 6 outlines how university choice operates among private school students in the Canadian context. Unlike many other countries, most notably the US and the UK, Canada’s higher education is not known for a strong hierarchy between higher education institutions. This chapter contributes to the developing literature in Canadian sociology of education regarding whether a hierarchy truly exists between Canadian universities. It also contributes to the literature on university choice by demonstrating that privileged families have an expanded set of criteria guiding university preferences, one that is class-based and appears to exclude or alter the choice factors predominant among the general population (namely cost and location).
By way of conclusion, Chapter 7 reviews the main findings and suggests avenues for further research as well as the implications of the study’s findings for the broader Canadian education system.

In the chapter that follows, I set the stage for the analysis by tracing the history and development of private schooling in Canada, including single-gender private schooling. I also describe Boy High’s and Girl High’s physical plants, curriculum, and other characteristics, and discuss the “whole child” philosophy espoused by each of these schools.
Elite private schools are important vehicles for the reproduction of advantage. The goal of this chapter is to provide background and contextual information on private schooling in Canada and Girl High and Boy High in particular. I begin to demonstrate the different ways that these schools reproduce privilege by educating a particular demographic and doing so in very particular and deliberate ways. I sketch the historical roots of elite private schooling in Canada before turning to a description of contemporary Canadian private schools. I also describe my field sites, Girl High and Boy High, and their shared philosophy of educating the “whole child”, connecting this approach to the privileged population these exclusive school settings serve.

HISTORICAL ROOTS OF PRIVATE SCHOOLING IN CANADA

Private schools are socially-exclusive sites strongly associated with an elite population and the maintenance of privilege. John Porter’s (1965) classic The Vertical Mosaic likens Canada to Britain in terms of its system of sponsored mobility and the role of private schools in this process. In Canada, private schools have a long history of educating political, social, and economic elites, much like is found in the US and UK. Historically, a significant proportion of the Canadian elite have attended private schools (Clement 1975; Porter 1965). When the British North America Act (BNA Act) in 1867 entrusted each province with the responsibility of developing their own education system, the result was very piecemeal; religious groups were the dominant force behind this development but it varied across the country, and Canada’s rural character meant that only some children would attend school, and only at certain times of the
year when the child was not needed by the family for farm labour. There were very few schools that educated beyond the elementary school level, and all of these were private (Gossage 1977).

By the mid-19th century, the idea of universal public education had taken hold. These institutions were regarded as useful tools of the state, a panacea to social, political, and moral problems. In this time, “private school” came to mean a conscious rejection of the state-funded system by parents who wanted a religious-based education, specialized teaching, superior teaching, or a particular educational environment (Gossage 1977). The Canadian private system imported many British private school traditions, like a rural location, athleticism, the house and prefect systems, and the strong religious roots; most Canadian private schools have Anglican roots, which “has traditionally been the religion of the well-to-do and influential” in Canada (Gossage 1977:4). It was during this time (mid 19th century) that Girl High was established. By the early part of the 20th century, when Boy High was established, the church influence declined with more private school institutions run by an independent creator.

*Private Schooling of Boys in Canada*

Private school education is perceived to be about preserving elitist norms and behaviours in its sons and daughters (Maxwell 1970), norms and behaviours that have looked very different for men and women. Accordingly, boys and girls were separated. As one Canadian boys’ school headmaster noted, since the boys enrolled at his school would become leaders, the school intended on at least making them wise leaders. Boys’ schools believed their function to be the education of boys already born into privilege (Gossage 1977). These schools focused not just on academic excellence but also character. As we know from Karabel’s work on elite US universities (2005), the meaning of ‘character’ can change across time. Historically in Canadian
Private schools, character has meant abiding by a common set of values and a particular code of ethics. For boys, their education focused on the ideals of integrity, fair play, service, and responsibility (Gossage 1977). This was very often achieved through athletics. Sports were central to the school and athleticism believed to be a dominant aspect of popularity and leadership at the school (Weinzweig 1970). Weinzweig (1970) found that the choices of occupations among a cohort of students attending the well-known Upper Canada College resemble those of their fathers and represent a narrow, male-dominated, professional part of the labour force: law, engineering, business/industry, and medicine; a fraction of those surveyed expressed an interest in the arts but did not believe that interest would translate into a career.

The history of Boy High available on their school website highlights some of what we would expect: athletics, academic excellence, a British influence, and the role of wealthy benefactors. But it also tries to carve out what it believes is unique in its history: a softer approach to discipline than is usually associated with private schools as well as an early attempt to foster interest in the arts among its student population.

Private Schooling of Girls in Canada

Private school education for girls reflected their social and economic position. In the US, girls’ schools did not resemble the barracks of boys’ schools; instead, they were more like home, meant to be comfortable, small, and nurturing alongside less pressure for academic success (Cookson and Persell 1985). In these schools, girls were socialized to become the helpmates of the powerful, and not the powerful themselves. Education was academic, cultural, and social. The same was true in Canada. Although the education of women became an increasingly popular idea in the late 19th century, popular opinion held that secondary education was certainly
not essential for girls and was possibly even a danger. Private schools could offer secondary education, but it would not be funded through the public coffers (Gossage 1977). Education for girls was terminal, not meant to be a path to postsecondary education.

Girl High was one of these private girls’ schools meant to offer an education to girls. As with other girls’ schools, it rang of “finishing school” until well into the 20th century (Gossage 1977). The Girl High history document states that the school’s history reflects the growth of the city “and reflects the progress of women in society.” The Girl High history document includes quotes from former school principals about the power of knowledge and the opportunities available with the anticipated opening of universities to women. It does not speak of the classes they offered in sewing, how to properly pour a cup of tea, and other duties expected of a wife of an upper-class gentleman, even though these classes were offered. These courses fit the private girls’ schools’ goal of preparing “Christian gentlewomen” through social refinement. In her 1965-66 study of an all-girls’ school in Canada, Maxwell (1970) uncovered a tension between the traditional education of the school and the possibility of a lifetime career. Marriage, children, and volunteering were presented by the school as incompatible with a career (Maxwell 1970). Girls who had been at the school longer and more intensely (via boarding) were most inclined to rate the former as more important and a stronger source of satisfaction than the latter, suggesting the school had a strong socializing influence. Academic achievement was discussed in reference to marriage, not just because university attendance would bring more exposure to upwardly mobile men but also because academic achievement seemed to be an increasingly popular

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4 That this statement avoids making even a vague reference to the content of that education does not surprise me, as my impression was that the school desired to distance itself from a history of educating girls in ways that were not associated with girls having power. During my first encounter with gatekeepers, the school administrator in question quickly addressed their history to say that the school had always been about educating girls for careers and other powerful positions.

5 This information is available through secondary sources tracing the history of private schooling for girls in Canada.
characteristic that men would want in a spouse (Maxwell 1970). By the mid-1980s, the principal of Girl High proclaimed the unique opportunity provided by a girls’ school for the education of future leaders in society. She stressed the need to rise above the stereotypes of women and aim to lead whole, fulfilling lives. Her rhetoric reflects the rhetoric of feminism and gender equality of the time, which is that women are capable of anything and should not be held back by schools, stereotypes, and strict family roles.

CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN PRIVATE SCHOOLING

Private schooling in Canada has changed in many ways since the founding of the earliest schools in the 19th century. In this section, I begin by first outlining two significant changes in the Canadian private schooling landscape: the increase in alternative, non-elite school organizations within private schooling and the narrowing of the elite, single-gender options as a result of economic factors. I then provide updated information on contemporary Canadian private schools, particularly that which is related to the exclusivity of schools like Boy High and Girl High, including information on tuition and applications.

A significant change in Canadian private schooling has been the enormous increase in private alternatives to the public education system. These “new sector” schools share small class sizes and low teacher/student ratios with other private schools like Boy High and Girl High; however, these newer private schools lack the prestige associated with some of the older private schools in Canada (Davies and Quirke 2007). Educational nomenclature has become an important tool for distinguishing these different forms of private schools from each other. The oldest, most elite private schools may also be called “independent schools”—following the British tradition—as a way of distinguishing themselves from the newer, non-elite schools.
(Davies and Quirke 2007). Another important distinguisher between private institutions is their membership in various private school associations. Boy High and Girl High are both members of the Canadian Accredited Independent Schools (CAIS). Membership in the CAIS is an indication that a school belongs to the most elite and historic sector of private schools (Davies and Quirke 2007; Maxwell and Maxwell 1994, 1995a, 1995b). To be a member of the CAIS, schools must fit criteria and meet approval of the CAIS, such as a demonstration of long-term viability and required annual reports. The schools are also members of the provincial Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario.

A second change in the Canadian private school landscape sometimes comes in response to economic downturns, known to have an effect on private schooling and especially single-gender schooling (Maxwell and Maxwell 1995b). During times of economic hardship, the net of prospective students is cast wider because these schools rely exclusively on non-government (i.e.: private) financial support through tuition and fees. Boys’ boarding schools in particular have gone co-ed in tough financial times; in 1984, 19 CAIS member schools were all-boys, but by 1992 only 8 were all-boys (Nowers and Bell 1993). However, many single-gender schools have had at least some co-ed component during their history to help withstand these tough financial times (Gossage 1977). Boy High and Girl High have never gone co-ed for any period of time for financial or any other reasons; it is not clear from their histories or the history of private schooling of Canada why this is the case, except perhaps that they have been established well enough to avoid the negative consequences of economic downturns.

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6 Please see Appendix A for CAIS and CIS Ontario membership criteria.
7 During this period of financial hardship, girls’ schools were buoyed by the findings of Sadker and Sadker (1995) and the AAUW about the shortchanging of girls in coeducation schools. Conceivably, boys’ schools are now benefiting from the current “boy turn” in the education literature and popular press.
One aspect of private schooling that has remained unchanged is elite schools’ limited accessibility to only those who can afford it. Given their high tuition and fees and selective admissions procedures (discussed shortly), Girl High and Boy High draw from among the privileged families in Toronto and surrounding area. Around 5-6% of Canadian students attend a private school (*The Daily* 2001). This number is slightly higher in Ontario and Toronto, at around 10% (Davies and Quirke 2007; Van Pelt, Allison, and Allison 2007). Private schooling has seen considerable growth; fewer than 2% of Canadian students attended a private school in 1960 (Van Pelt et al. 2007). However, it should be noted that these estimates include all private schools, including the less elite new sector schools and religious-based private schools that lack some of the features of the most elite, academically-focused schools of which Girl High and Boy High are a part.

Although parents of all income, education, and occupational groups choose to send their children to private schools, parents choosing private schools tend, on average, to be better educated, earn higher incomes, and be employed in higher status occupations than those who opt to send their child(ren) to a publicly-funded school (Van Pelt et al. 2007). Table 1 demonstrates some of these differences. For example, of those surveyed, around half of all Ontario families with a child enrolled at a private school report a family income of $120,000 or more, while just under one-quarter of families with a child in the public system report the same level of family income.
Table 1: Private school family background information and comparable family background information, Ontario, in percentages.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family income</th>
<th>Private</th>
<th>Public</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$120,000 per year or more</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>23</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Education</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than high school</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctorate (including M.D.)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Professional health worker”</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Management position”</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Senior manager”</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Homemaker”</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Van Pelt et al. 2007.

1 It is important to note that these numbers include all private schools, not just the most academically-selective, historic, elite private schools of which Boy High and Girl High are a part. Considering some of the differences between these elite institutions and non-elite institutions in the same category—particularly tuition and fees—it seems plausible that these patterns indicating the gaps between private school families and public schools families would be more pronounced in this table had the private school information be restricted to “independent schools”, members of CAIS and CIS of Ontario.

2 Data are drawn from census information on comparable Ontario families (Van Pelt et al. 2007).

3 “Graduate” and “Doctorate” are a subset of the “University” category.

4 There are no comparable data in Ontario for the “homemaker” category. It is estimated by the researchers that homemakers are more likely among families in the Ontario private school system than comparable families in Ontario’s public system.

It is not surprising that private school families are those that have higher income levels.

To many families, the tuition and fees associated with attendance at an elite private school would be prohibitive. During the period of data collection, tuition at Girl High and Boy High was around $20,000 per year per student, plus a one-time fee of $5,000 for new students and an annual expected family donation of at least $1000-$2000. Scholarships and bursaries are very few in number and are intended to cover only a portion of tuition. Most estimates are that less than 10% of students at Canadian private schools receive some form of financial aid (Nowers and Bell 1993). Eight percent of the families in a study of Ontario private school families

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8 Tuition has since increased to closer to $30,000 and new family donations are now at approximately $8,000. The numbers for Girl High and Boy High are intentionally imprecise, to protect confidentiality.
reported receiving some bursary, scholarship, discount, or subsidy used toward part of the cost of tuition (Van Pelt et al. 2007). While Girl High and Boy High advertise their scholarships, there is little available information on the current number of scholarships and bursaries awarded and in what amount. Nowers and Ball (1993), Canadian parents interested in collating information on Canadian private schools, were able to locate specific numbers in their research, showing that, in 1992-93, 4% of Girl High students received financial aid that, on average, covered less than one-third of tuition, while 8% of Boy High students received financial aid that, on average, covered less than half of tuition.

Girl High and Boy High have extensive application procedures, as is the case with comparable Toronto private schools. Prospective applicants apply for entry at specific grade level entry points, although occasionally students are accepted at other grade levels. The applications request information about the child as a student and as an individual (their academic likes and dislikes, extra-curricular interests, etc). Students are required to take a standardized test and provide transcripts from their current educational institution if enrolled at another school. Prospective students and their parents are interviewed by school admissions officers as well as senior administrators. The desired outcome is acquiring academically excellent students who will also fit well in the school. In the words of Mr. Milton\(^9\), headmaster of Boy High:

We do interviews, we do scores. We try to match as much information both clinical and conversational, and try to assess young men… In the [Boy High] admissions process, the parents believe that they are interviewed; their conversation with [head admissions staff] is second to the boys’ conversations. The boy is being interviewed. And at other schools, I’m told, the parents will be interviewed more than the boys. And that's not—[pause]—we’re focusing on the well being of the boy. We have to know that the boy will do well, and the people doing the interviewing really drill, really get into the boy’s space and start to understand where he is, and where he wants to go to, and where he’s starting from I guess socially, emotionally.

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\(^9\) Pseudonyms are used throughout.
Mr. Milton’s discussion of the application process indicates that the applicant must be competitive academically and personally but also must fit within the broader school philosophy centred on the “whole boy” (discussed later in this chapter). The same sentiment is echoed by Ms. Harris, Girl High’s principal, who also speaks about the role of parents in the application process:

Because we [Girl High] believe in individualization and supporting dreams and goals, our parents are coming to buy the mission. They like what it is we’re doing. We’re really clear with them that that’s who we are because it’s much easier for us to have a parent who’s onside than one who is not. So if I’ve got a parent who really wants the homework, the speller, the drills, you’re going to be so unhappy here. Don’t come, and we really are clear to say… it is about fit and you need to find a school where you’re happy and this is about innovative education. It’s different.

One of the reasons why the parents of children attending an Ontario private school elect to send their child to such an institution is the perceived academic quality; private schools are believed to offer an engaging, enriched, and challenging curriculum compared to public schools (Van Pelt et al. 2007). The Ontario curriculum from which Boy High and Girl High draw their curriculum includes a broad range of courses and subject matter. For example, the Ontario high school curriculum places students into tracks beginning in the ninth grade; these tracks are associated with the student’s ultimate destination (such as workplace, apprenticeship, or university). Courses range from chemistry to visual arts to hairstyling. Girl High and Boy High offer only a narrow section of the provincial curriculum, specifically only those courses that feed directly into university admissions (as designated by course codes). As a result, a significant portion of the Ontario curriculum is not offered at Girl High and Boy High, namely those courses intended to lead to study at a community college, apprenticeship, or a direct transition to the workforce from high school. In addition, Girl High and Boy High offer Advanced Placement (AP) courses. These courses can be used as credit in many first-year university courses across
North America. These courses include but go beyond provincial curriculum requirements for these subjects.

University preparation and admission are additional reasons for selecting an Ontario private school (Van Pelt et al. 2007) and is a central dimension to Girl High and Boy High. As just mentioned, the curriculum is designed to meet the needs of students who will go on to university. During my data collection, 100 percent of all Boy High and Girl High students attended a university after graduation. These schools call themselves “university prep” schools. Boy High and Girl High proudly advertise the universities where their students have been offered a spot in the most recent year as well as in previous years. This list includes institutions across Canada and around the world. (I discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6.) The university focus is present in all aspects of the school. Some students went so far as saying their parents sent them to Boy High or Girl High for the sole purpose of preparing them for university. Not only would students be prepared academically, but many believed the school could help directly facilitate entry into a university, according to these students. University was therefore tied to their very enrolment in some cases. One student, Mark, noted erroneously that getting its students into university was part of Boy High’s mission statement. Many students talk about their school involvement in a “means to an end” kind of way, knowing that involvement in student council, clubs, and volunteering will boost their applicant profile. One student’s ‘pitch’ for a grade representative position at Boy High stood out because he said: “I’m not doing this just to get into university.” The other students implied or even stated outright that they were interested in the grade representative position as a “resume booster.” As I illustrate throughout this dissertation, much of Girl High and Boy High can be understood vis à vis “university prep”.
While Girl High and Boy High have certainly changed over the years, they have always drawn students from privileged neighbourhoods in Toronto and have been unique in the education system in Ontario. With this outline of the history of elite private schooling in Canada complete, I turn now to the specifics of Girl High and Boy High. It is at these two private school sites where I immersed myself for months, learning about the ins-and-outs of elite private schooling.

GIRL HIGH

Girl High is a beautiful historic stone building, complete with ivy growing along the walls. The stone driveway circles around the front of the school, where large and heavy wood doors greet students, parents, and visitors. Seasonal flowers frame the entranceway, and a school banner is visible from the sidewalk and road. Girl High is nestled into a neighbourhood near a busy road. At one time the area would have been considered rural, but Toronto has expanded around it. The neighbourhood contains large, detached homes and large, old trees. Construction crews are often in the surrounding area as they work on upgrading existing homes, and maintenance crews are responsible for their upkeep. Shopping is nearby, mostly boutiques, fine food stores and independent grocers, and coffee shops selling custom, specialized drinks.

The foyer of Girl High is laden with wood on the walls and heavy materials draping either side of the large windows that look out onto a courtyard. Portraits of previous principals adorn the walls. Visitors are attended to by a receptionist sitting behind a large wooden desk, and invited to sit in an upholstered armchair while they wait to be collected by the person with whom they have an appointment. The only noise comes from students (sometimes accompanied by a parent) signing in late and quickly running off. The relative silence is broken once the
upper school assembly has ended. Girls stream into the main foyer and hallways en route to their class, talking and laughing loudly among themselves. Their happy noises fill the hallways. Some of the girls hug before going their separate ways. There is a palpable excitement, although there is nothing unusual taking place at the school today; every day is filled with the excited noises of Girl High students.

Girl High educates students beginning in primary grades and continuing up to secondary school, divided into a lower school, middle school, and upper school. Very few activities bring students from across these grades together; for the most part, they occupy distinct areas of the school building.

As this is a uniformed school, the girls are dressed similarly. Although the uniform includes a pants option, only a couple of girls wear them. Most of the girls wear kilts, the uniform shirt, and the uniform sweater in the cooler months. The school monitors the girls’ uniforms closely, evident in the fact that their kilts all approach their knees, their socks are all the same colour, and their shoes are plain and a staid black. They mostly wear their hair down, although many have their hair in a ponytail at the end of the day. Many girls wear similar hair bands decorated with a bow or flower. Following the rules, their nails are unpainted and their hair is not dyed an unusual or adventurous colour. When a girl bends the rules a bit, colouring a streak of pink or blue into her hair, she does it in an inconspicuous spot and wears her hair in a way to minimize the risk of teachers and administrators taking notice. Discipline over hair happened rarely and typically was associated only with informal punishment, such as a reprimanding stare at the student. In the event that the rule-breaking could be addressed—as in the case of a student wearing nail polish—the student was asked to leave the room to remove her nail polish. I witnessed each of the above only a few times.
As the students move through the hallways to their classes, they pass class photos of each graduating cohort in recent history of the school, advertisements for upcoming fundraising and social events, and photography and art produced by the students in their classes. Lockers line many of the hallways. The classrooms are located on all levels of the school. Each classroom has at least one window, some the original leaded glass; especially compared to the heavy wood of the front entranceway, the classrooms are bright and airy. The desks are placed in a circle or, if the teacher prefers it or the presence of science lab benches make it necessary, rows of three or four desks across. The desks are clean, without any graffiti markings from the students. The rooms contain chalkboards and white interactive Smart boards which are used mostly in science and math classes.

When the students are not in classes, they can go to a large school cafeteria, a greenhouse-like canteen and lounge area, or the newly refurbished library. There are also rooms devoted to guidance counselling, university counselling, and health services. In a relatively recent area of the school sits the large gymnasium, furthest away from the front entrance. The entrance to the gymnasium includes glass cases full of athletics awards. There is also a dance studio and weight room.

Girl High graduates over 100 students each year. The total number of students at the school is approximately 1,000. Senior school courses at Girl High are taught by over 20 teachers alongside guidance counsellors and university counsellors. Class sizes range depending on the subject matter, from just a few students to upwards of 20-25 students.

BOY HIGH
On a beautiful, sunny fall day, the entire school gathers on the sports field at Boy High. As they do in most years, the school will take a picture of the whole school, together. The boys and their teachers cluster together on the state-of-the-art field and, together, take up less than 10% of the available space. As with Girl High, Boy High is nestled into a neighbourhood of large trees and large, detached homes, and close to a busy road. It, too, would have once been rural. Compared to Girl High, Boy High is sprawled out across more acreage. The boys take advantage of this space before and after school or over the lunch hour, hanging out in front of the school or playing a spontaneous game of soccer.

Much like Girl High, the Boy High school building contains a large and historic centre with new wings built off of it. The driveway leads to a front entranceway with a large wooden door, flanked on either side by large urns containing seasonal flowers. A fundraiser is advertised on a sandwich board out front, intended to draw the attention of parents as they drop off their child. Upon entering the building, a visitor is greeted by a receptionist at a central desk and invited to sit in an area with comfortable upholstered furniture and woven rugs. The foyer is bright and welcoming. The most recent school newsletter sits on a nearby coffee table and the aroma of fresh flowers fills the space.

In the distance is the sound of the boys moving through the school. The bright hallways contain photographs of famous alumni, an installation of art recently produced by grade 10 students, student award plaques—most of them related to athletics—and bulletin boards. These bulletin boards are full of school news, ongoing fundraising campaigns and, most predominantly, team tryouts, game results, and intramural lunchtime activities. These boards become riddled with jokes and jabs during the times of the year when the “houses” are competing against each other. Boys across the grades—primary to secondary, also named lower school, middle school,
and upper school—are placed into groups called “houses” when they begin at the school. A house leader is elected each year. While sometimes house competitions involve only those students in their particular school level (ex: upper school), the house system is meant to bring together students across the grades during school-wide, house-wide events and competitions. Houses proudly wear their colours on these special event days and, in the interests of team spirit, mock and make jokes at the expense of the other houses. House points are earned throughout the year and a winning house declared at year’s end. Girl High has a similar house system that operates in the same way and with the same degree of spirit and competition.

The hallways leading to the classrooms are often difficult to pass through as the boys hang out with each other in clusters by their lockers. Sometimes the boys wrestle with each other in the hallways but these play fights end quickly when a teacher is trying to walk through the hall. The classrooms are spacious and bright. As with the classrooms at Girl High, there is a blackboard and a white Smart board in most classrooms and desks are arranged in a circle or in rows. Many of the desks are covered with student graffiti. For example, from my field notes:

The desk I’m sitting at is one that I’ve never sat at before. I know this because of what is written on the inside of the desk. There are random initials, drawings, and an NHL logo (loosely). But there are also words. “Queerbag.” “Your [sic] Gay.” “Faggot.” “Pure…just…like…me….” “Na bitch you’d have a dick in yo mouth.” “I got a bitch to suck a dick
till I nut split on my gut
slurp that shit back up.
Ain’t that a slut tell ya.”

Posters adorn the walls and a few classrooms even have murals painted by a student onto the wall. The science wing of the school contains well-appointed, bright lab spaces with enough equipment for all students to have their own lab bench when working in pairs.

Boy High graduates over 100 students each year. The total number of students at the school is approximately 1,000. Boy High’s senior school classes are taught by over 20 teachers.
There are also guidance counsellors and university counsellors. Class sizes range depending on the subject matter, from just a few students to upwards of 20-25 students.

In the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the major similarities between the schools in relation to curriculum, particularly the notion of educating the “whole child”.

THE SIMILARITIES BETWEEN GIRL HIGH AND BOY HIGH

Girl High and Boy High share many of the same features and attributes. One of these is the signs of wealth that permeate the schools. The physical plants are impressive, from the well-treed surroundings to the clean hallways, inviting foyers, and well-stocked classrooms. The cars in the parking lots and nearby streets are luxury imported cars, many of which belong to students, not parents. Because neither school is serviced by school buses, seeing parents drop their children off at school is very common. On a few occasions, presumably when a parent is unavailable to pick up the student, a town car picks them up from school instead. Occasionally, Filipino nannies accompany parents (typically mothers) to pick up their child(ren) at the end of the school day. In the days leading up to March Break, some students are picked up in a stretch limousine to be taken directly to the airport for a flight out of the country. These obvious signs of wealth are embodied by students on non-uniform days when they can be seen in trendy and branded clothing and shoes.

Both schools maintain theatre, music, athletics, and robotics programs alongside the large number of other clubs students can join. Examples include clubs related to languages, music, the environment, poverty, fair trade, and entrepreneurship. Some students pursue these opportunities out of interest while others pursue them strategically, to boost their university applications. In offering these opportunities and actively encouraging their students to take advantage of the
opportunities, Girl High and Boy High ensure that their students have the best chance of boosting their university applications. Students often seemed exhausted and had high levels of stress, but they believed being involved was important. They recognized that their school pushed them to do these things, but they readily accepted this advice and heavy involvement was certainly the norm. Ms. Harris—the principal at Girl High—noted that having a student not involved in a club was a ‘red flag’ and would alert them to a student’s need for attention, support, and encouragement.

Girls High and Boy High also share some organizational features that structure the school session. One of these is the placement of upper year students into mentor groups. These mentor groups are composed of a teacher and approximately 8-10 students. They meet regularly, usually weekly, throughout the school year. They are intended to create safe and nurturing environments where students can talk about what is new in their life and what might be causing them stress. They also serve the purpose of not letting any students fall through the cracks. Although the school population is small and so are classes, mentor groups provide an additional safety net for students via the visibility with their mentor group leader.

In addition to the house system described, Boy High and Girl High students also elect grade representatives and prefects. Prefects each have different portfolios—such as social, outreach, and athletics—and organize events and raise awareness throughout the school year. These positions are in demand and the elections are quite competitive. There is a long tradition of the prefect system, with British roots, as it is seen as an opportunity for students to have an opportunity to exercise leadership in their early years (Persell and Cookson 1985b). The administrators and teachers were uncomfortable in many ways with this system, believing that
the election was essentially a popularity contest that left many students out. Nevertheless, the tradition continues. Prefects are distinguished through a modification of their uniform.

Toward the end of the school year, the prefects are not the only students who are distinguishable through their dress; grade 12 students also modify their uniforms in a way sanctioned by school administrators. Many wear ‘grad sweaters’ listing their school name and their year of graduation. Others start to wear the school rings they purchased to commemorate their final year. Grade 12 students are frequently referred to simply as “Grads” around the school, given a special status through this moniker and through their uniform changes. They are the leaders of the schools and the name represents the culmination of years of education.

*Educating the “Whole Child”*

A predominant aspect of both Girl High and Boy High is the philosophy of educating the “whole child.” The schools define their role as more than just providing academic preparation; this is as evident in my interviews with administrators as it is in promotional documents. (I discuss my methodological approach in Chapter 3.) “Character” is a central focus of these schools, consistent with the history of all elite private schools. One does not have to put in too much effort to hear the kinds of qualities they value and try to engender in their students. These qualities are talked about during assemblies, in classes, at special occasions like graduation ceremonies, and make up a significant proportion of the printed newsletters, alumni magazines, and promotional material distributed on behalf of the schools.

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10 A “whole child” philosophy is not necessarily exclusive to elite private schools. However, the curriculum through which schools aim to develop the whole child may vary. A striking contrast to the “whole child” approach of Girl High and Boy High is discussed by Tsuneyoshi (1994), where children are responsible for doing chores around the school and maintaining the orderliness and availability of classroom supplies.
Although this “whole child” approach is common to both schools, there are some gender differences among the kinds of qualities valued. The principal at Girl High, Ms. Harris, listed confidence, collaboration, passion for learning, and caring as the hallmarks of a successful Girl High graduate. The headmaster of Boy High listed trustworthiness, perspective, compassion, honesty, and being someone you want to work with and can respect as the hallmarks of a successful Boy High grad. These slight gender differences—the mention of career by Boy High but not Girl High—are apparent in the everyday of the school as well, not just in school headmaster/principal philosophies and school advertisements. For example, and beginning in very early grades, the students at Boy High were instructed explicitly on how to act in “gentlemanly” ways (to use the words of Mr. Higgins—the AP Biology teacher), including the importance of holding doors open and a solid handshake. I did not witness this kind of instruction at Girl High.

There was one quality that both Boy High and Girl High emphasized above all: leadership. This quality came up most frequently in assemblies and interviews, and also carried a certain amount of reverence when discussed. My first day at Boy High was spent attending an upper-school faculty meeting so that I could be introduced to the teachers, many of whom I would be approaching in the next few days to request permission to join their class. In this meeting, the senior school head, Mr. Cook, mentions a “very good proposal” from Jeffrey to create a grad lounge for grade 12 students, and he opens it up for debate. Although the teachers unanimously state that they wish all of their students were like Jeffrey, they overwhelmingly are not in favour of a grad lounge. Their concerns are mainly with disciplinary issues and surveillance (as one teacher said: “the issue is about keeping an eye on the students, maintaining discipline and decorum”). There are also some concerns about the room being used by only
some cliques in the school, and therefore not truly being a grad lounge for all graduating students. However, despite the overwhelming and unified unfavourable response from teachers, the issue is tabled for now so that they can all do more investigation. This almost surprising reaction came primarily as a result of the words of Mr. Miller, a teacher and coach, who says: “for the sake of encouraging the boys to take initiative and show this kind of leadership, we should seriously consider the proposal and try out the lounge idea.” In the end, the grad lounge was created.

At Girl High, Jane’s initiative is as widely praised as Jeffrey’s is at Boy High. As a grade 11 student, she began a global awareness club\footnote{I have changed the nature of the club, to ensure confidentiality.}, focusing on things like providing fair trade goods for purchase within school walls alongside partnering with organizations focused on global inequality. The club also raises money for charity. Jane was frequently praised by administrators and teachers for showing leadership and bringing attention to an important social issue. Often this praise happened publicly, like at assemblies involving the entire senior school. Her story was also featured in more than one fundraising newsletter sent out to alumni, current families, and donors. For example, a four-page fundraising bulletin devotes a full page to her story and includes a large, colour photograph of Jane standing alone in a determined pose (eyes focused on something in the distance, body squarely at the camera, arms at her side with hands in a slight fist).

Jeffrey and Jane are outliers. True, most of the students at Boy High and Girl High are involved in their schools’ clubs and other extra-curricular activities. But Jeffrey and Jane, because of their qualities, are frequently elevated above the others because they are ideal types of what the school sees as the kind of qualities worthy of reward and respect and what they hope to instill in their graduates. One administrator at Boy High went as far as to say in an assembly that
students should try to be more like Jeffrey in singing the national anthem, because he was particularly patriotic. Even a casual observer would know that these students possessed the leadership quality deemed crucially important in these settings. They are not just involved in their schools; they are leaders.

In my interviews with administrators, I ask about the hallmarks of a successful grad. These interviews confirm the importance of leadership. Mr. Cook, the senior school head of Boy High, connects leadership to a willingness to help. He elaborates on this during his closing remarks at a year-end event to acknowledge student leaders in athletics, academics, and philanthropy. From my field notes: “Mr. Cook says that leadership is not about compliance. Think of Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, and Gandhi. When it comes to leadership, it’s not about the title, it’s not about passively standing by waiting for a title. It’s about courage, about offering what you have, and not waiting.” He urges them to be their “best self”, to show character and leadership, and to ask the question “how can I help?” The principal of Girl High, Ms. Harris, speaks of being significant in your community—whether that be your school, work, family, or neighbourhood. She also frames success in terms of confidence and making a difference: “a successful [Girl High] graduate is just confident. They think they can make a difference in the world; they’re going out there; they’re passionate about learning; care about people; that’s all I would hope for.”

Both Boy High and Girl High make it common practice to speak about their alumni where possible, which is in keeping with their desire to emphasize the school community that exists inside and outside school walls, as a student and an alumnae. Certain alumni were elevated above the others for supposedly possessing the kinds of qualities that the school valued in its grads. At Boy High, the main hallway included framed, black-and-white photographs and
accompanying biographies of alumni from a wide range of graduating years who personified the traits of the kind of men who graduate from Boy High. Most of these men’s success stories were rooted in leadership in business, athletics, and war. Although the profiles became less visible the more you walked through the hallway and became used to seeing them, they attracted the attention of the youngest students, prospective families, and visiting Boy High parents, and acted as a constant reminder of leadership. At Girl High, the successful alumni did more than line the hallways with their images. Those who were elevated above the others for their display of the hallmarks of a successful Girl High graduate were also frequently included in promotional materials and newsletters sent to current families. Their stories involve leadership in their field, particularly in medicine and science. These women are called “pioneers.”

Part of engendering leadership in their students is to support and work with them at every turn. To this end, the schools create a large number of leadership positions and support their students when they come to the administration with ideas about other leadership opportunities and positions. Working alongside students is also evident in the classroom, as administrators encourage the teachers to think of themselves as collaborators with students on their education and not teachers in the strict sense of the word. In keeping with this, collaboration between teachers and students is the norm in both school settings. Collaborating with students on their education—even if it results in additional work for teachers and support staff—is inscribed into the institutions via school documents like newsletters and school magazines. Girl High conceptualizes collaboration as happening within a learning community: “It is through collaboration, and not working in isolation, that girls test their theories, ask new questions, create and conduct experiments to recast their ideas through this alchemical exchange among

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12 Perhaps with a lack of self-reflection, the Boy High history document includes a statement about establishing awards for everything. To protect the confidentiality of the school, I am unable to include the quote.
learners.” Collaboration happens between students and between students and teachers, and Girl High promises to provide whatever will help students and teachers learn together.

The publications from Boy High tell a similar story of teachers working for and with students. For example, a strategic planning document produced immediately prior to my entry at Boy High outlines a number of goals that prioritize the needs of students, even though this takes additional time and resources for teachers, including: reducing “class sizes to create more time for one-on-one interaction between teachers and students”; strengthening the school’s mentoring programme, including progress reports to parents; and providing “teams of learning coaches in classrooms…so that they and the teachers can provide ongoing support and enrichment for individual boys.” As with Girl High, Boy High promotes its efforts to prioritize the needs of students and provide whatever they need from teachers and support staff. Boy High also explicitly uses the word ‘collaboration’ to describe the classroom relationship between student and teacher; in this case, it is inscribed into the “core curriculum” section of one document. The document highlights their intention to do even more collaborative teaching practices than they do presently, just one exciting development alongside partnerships with the education, business, and media communities. In other words, the collaboration at Boy High happens at the school and beyond, into the broader community.

These documents also highlight the nature of the classroom, emphasizing inquiry, self-discovery, and a style of learning that opposes rote learning. For example, Girl High emphasizes that this learning begins early, in kindergarten:

A strong start will mean a better finish. This statement perfectly describes our inquiry-based learning approach for kindergarten, where children are treated as intellectually powerful beings and are encouraged to express themselves. …girls are encouraged to share their thoughts and ideas, and to critique, compare, and
problem solve. This unique method of teaching respects the ideas and values that children possess and recognizes their amazing ability to learn.

These words echo the words used in Anyon’s (1980, 1981) investigation of the correspondence principle in classroom settings. Key words like “critique”, “problem solve”, and “inquiry” point to an education that focuses on independent and creative thinking as valuable learning, as is associated with schools located in more affluent areas. In another example, the Boy High prospectus states: “At [Boy High] we understand that education is a life-long process of discovery and challenge. At every level, in every discipline, our students are encouraged to learn more than just facts; they must also learn how to expand their skills, minds and experiences.”

The documents from Girl High and Boy High demonstrate classrooms where teachers and students work together to develop students’ independence, discovery, critical thinking, and creativity. A central aspect of the correspondence principle is the relationship between what happens in educational institutions and how that relates to what a student can expect to do and achieve in the labour market. In the section that follows, I make connections between collaboration, the style of learning, and what happens after graduation, beyond the walls of the school.

Leaders Beyond the Walls of the School

Beyond engendering leadership within the walls of Girl High and Boy High, school documents also demonstrate a school philosophy about leadership qualities in their graduates. In many cases, direct links are made between classroom practices and the skills necessary for the careers and leadership positions Boy High and Girl High students will take up, revealing what is taken-for-granted about the kinds of positions these students will occupy in the future. The educators at Girl High believe “to be innovative in the world, we have to work together”, which
frames their approach to collaborative learning (quoted from a school fundraising newsletter).

They are nurturing innovators, students who will enter a complex world prepared to meet its challenges: “In preparing [Girl High] students to thrive within a world of complex networks and interdependencies, we must provide them the tools and opportunities to use their intellectual capacity to probe the layers of a problem” (school document).

Also notable is that Girl High is not tying the skills nurtured through their education to specific careers, or even the notion of a career at all. Leadership is conceived of in a multitude of ways. Ms. Harris’ speech to the graduating students is the best illustration of this message (also discussed in Chapter 5); Ms. Harris tells the students that any choice is available to them—they can be philanthropists, an award-winning photographer, a journalist, a scientist, or a mom raising conscientious children who will make change in the world. This lends itself toward imagining a future with any number of possibilities, allowing parents, donors, and students to imagine the various avenues available to a student who has been educated at Girl High. At Boy High, there was never a discussion centred on the kind of future Boy High grads would take up; the assumption that the students would move into the paid labour market is implicit. Taken-for-granted in both educational settings is that these students are those people meant to be successful and take on—and solve—important problems in the “real world”, as one document calls it. These are leaders, inside and outside of the workforce.

Like Girl High’s conceptualization of a broad future for its graduates, one that certainly includes leadership and success and may or may not be tied to the workforce, Boy High makes similar references to the future of its graduates in connection with the educational program. This discussion is primarily contained within Boy High’s strategic planning document in connection
with the curriculum they aim to develop and strengthen over the course of the implementation of the plan.

The first core objective, to enhance excellence in academics, focuses us on our most fundamental, widely recognized strength, and calls on us to investigate the most effective ways to prepare our boys for success in the world that they will face—a very different world than the one our generation faced. The best current educational thinking tells us that the key skills for success will be creative and critical thinking, problem solving, and a comfort and facility with collaboration.

As with Girl High, Boy High emphasizes creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, and collaboration as the keys to success. These students are being prepared “for success in the world that they will face.” The picture painted is one of Boy High and Girl High alumni occupying important, intellectual, and challenging positions in an advanced society. These are not students exposed to rote learning, memorization, and obedience to authority in anticipation of working-class jobs (Bowles and Gintis 1976); these students are being ‘prepared for power’ (Cookson and Persell 1985). If the conviction of Girl High and Boy High demonstrated above is any indication, these students will be at the top of the workplace hierarchy. They will lead others, solve problems, rise to meet challenges, and work innovatively and creatively to make a contribution to their workplaces.

Leadership extends to the future alumni’s role in the lives of others in their community. Noblesse oblige has been an important component to all private schools historically and this emphasis is still visible in the workings of Boy High and Girl High. Noblesse oblige refers to the obligation and duty among the privileged to assist those less fortunate, tied to honour and character. At Boy High and Girl High, outreach is considered a dimension of educating the whole child. Outreach happens locally in the Toronto area community and extends internationally. Locally, many students at Girl High and Boy High volunteer as tutors at schools in economically disadvantaged neighbourhoods. They can also volunteer over the March Break
period (two weeks in the private school system) across Canada and in different spots around the world (Africa, Caribbean, and South America being particularly popular destinations), mostly working with impoverished students. They participate as a group supervised by a teacher.

Beyond community outreach, another important cornerstone to noblesse oblige at Girl High and Boy High is fundraising. Fundraising events are held throughout the school year, ranging from small-scale in-class fundraising to large-scale evening events that draw people from across the private school community. There are also school-wide fundraisers, such as the week at Girl High devoted to raising funds for a local community agency, or the participation of members of Boy High in a charity cycling event. Finally, fundraising happens spontaneously as needs arrive, such as raising funds for a community suddenly in need through natural disasters. Each year, a small number of students at each school are recognized in an audience of their peers for their volunteer efforts and rewarded with a small token.

CONCLUSION

Despite a number of significant changes in the education system from the days private schools first established in Canada to now, a number of things have remained the same; private schools still educate a minority of Canadian students, a minority that can afford private school tuition and fees; schools are still marked by some of the British traditions that marked their origins, such as the house system, prefects, and noblesse oblige. These institutions—including Girl High and Boy High—are steeped in tradition. They have developed their philosophies around teaching the whole child and the future leaders of our world over years of school history. Much like Bowles and Gintis argue, these schools are preparing their students according to the belief that they will be leaders in their occupation. References to advanced societies and
complex worlds leave no misunderstanding: these students are not being prepared for positions involving alienation. They will be at the top of the workplace hierarchy, not toiling at the bottom. Furthermore, the schools have conviction in their belief that they are in the best position to meet the needs of boys and girls (discussed in greater depth in Chapter 5). In the next chapter, I discuss my methodological approach in the context of the literature on “studying up”, the study of elite populations.
Chapter 3  
DATA & METHOD  
LEAST ADULT, LEAST GENDERED...LEAST CLASSED? THINKING ABOUT CLASS IN A PRIVILEGED ENVIRONMENT

This ethnographic research project combined participant observation, interviews, and analysis of web and print materials. The research sites are two academically-selective, elite, single-gender private schools in Toronto. I refer to the schools as “Girl High” and “Boy High” to indicate their single-genderedness and for ease of reference. In this chapter, I describe the data and method used to collect the data. I also situate the project within the literature on “studying up”, which is a term generally used to describe the research of elites. I incorporate a discussion of researcher reflexivity. All recruitment, data collection, and data management procedures described in this chapter follow the guidelines outlined by the Tri-Council Policy Statement (PRE 2003) and the University of Toronto (Office of Research Ethics 2007). I have replaced all names with pseudonyms.

My research questions revolve around class and gender reproduction among the relatively privileged, and especially the role of the education system in reproducing privilege. Selecting elite private schools as the research sites provided the most direct way of studying a privileged population in a privileged, exclusive educational setting. Granted, many public schools also draw students from a privileged background if the school is situated in a wealthy neighbourhood.

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14 Collecting alumni information was another aspect of the methodology. The intention was to get a glimpse into what kind of positions the graduate takes up as a way of considering the ‘match’ between the ideals of the single-gender school and the reality of outcomes. Unfortunately, the alumni data were incomplete. No part of this analysis makes use of alumni data.

15 Traditionally, the study of elites refers to the study of economic, political, and social elites, such as Ostrander’s (1993) study of women of the upper-class. In my case, I do not claim to be studying elites per se. Instead, my research took place in privileged, exclusive educational environments. These schools are contributing to the creation of a privileged group, with future elites possibly among them. In addition to the privileged environment, it is also the case that most Girl High and Boy High students enjoy a degree of privilege that I do not by virtue of their family backgrounds. For these reasons, the studying up literature is relevant and useful for contextualizing my experience as a researcher. I make an effort to avoid referring to ‘elites’, and instead make reference to privilege, exclusivity, and studying up. When referring to the schools, I use terminology like elite, privileged, or exclusive.
However, elite private schools—especially those with long histories like Boy High and Girl High—were designed to educate a privileged strata of society and prepare students for a life of importance. This makes them particularly appropriate sites for addressing my research questions. Unlike ‘new sector’ private schools (Davies and Quirke 2007), the set of private schools of which Boy High and Girl High are a part are among the most elite. They are what most think of when hearing the word “private”: not just technically privately funded, but also highly selective, with bountiful resources, long histories, and with old and beautiful buildings often covered with ivy. Methodologically, literature in the sociology of education is consistent with broader sociological literature in its tendency to “gaze downward” and conduct research among those with less privilege than those attending institutions like Girl High and Boy High. The selection of elite private schools as research sites and ethnography as the methodological tool were therefore also methodological decisions, in an effort to fill a gap in the literature with sufficient attention to nuance and process.

Studying a girls’ and a boys’ school set up a particular dichotomy and obvious focus for the research. The research sites allowed me to compare and contrast the nature of social class reproduction for girls and for boys. Schools that maintain a single-gender focus are geared towards a particular market of families interested not only in what they believe to be the benefits of an elite private school experience but also what they believe to be the benefits of gender-segregated education. Single-gender schools are affiliated with national and international single-gender school associations that proclaim the benefits of single-gender education. These associations discuss research on classroom dynamics, math and science achievement, differences in maturity level, and brain differences, and use these research findings as the basis of their
argument for the benefits of single-gender schools. Schools that subscribe to these principles pay particular attention to gender, if only to appease their market. Co-ed private schools were excluded because they focus more on boys and girls learning to work together in preparation for cooperation in co-ed workplaces, rather than being educational institutions designed around gender separation. They are not focusing on gender differences as the basis for their curriculum and approach to student life.

DATA AND METHOD

Ethnography is a method used to study other cultures. Given the exclusivity of private schools, the small niche of the population served by these organizations, and my lack of personal experience with elite, single-gender schooling, it made sense to approach the study of Boy High and Girl High via ethnography. As with most ethnography, data collection was not based on a fixed research design and the categories to interpret data grew out of the data itself and were not predetermined. However, ethnography is not unguided research; there are always some guiding questions, problems, or orienting perspective (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007; Silverman 2006). My guiding questions were centered on how these elite educational settings were contributing to class reproduction and gender reproduction. I initially expected to focus almost exclusively on gender—comparing each school’s particular understanding of boys/girls and gender difference and how these understandings affected the everyday practices within the

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16 The National Coalition of Girls’ Schools cites the primary benefit to be opportunity, including more leadership opportunities, that prepare girls for success in college or university, encourage them to make broader choices (including math and science), and may also improve academic performance. The association pays most attention to the research on classroom participation, curricula, etc, and refers only vaguely to gender differences in cognitive abilities. The International Boys’ School Coalition emphasizes brain research. They also state the benefits to be encouraging broad participation (from arts to sports), avoiding comparisons to girls (who mature more quickly), a curriculum designed to excite boys, the ability to avoid romantic involvement with girls before they are ready to be involved and avoid posturing in order to meet gender stereotypes, and an education that aims to see boys succeed (in reference to the public concern about boys’ lack of success in coeducation schools).
school as well as what they were preparing their students for in the future—but I eventually also paid closer attention to those moments when gender is not as salient an attribute as class privilege. In particular, I was interested in the advantages for students embedded within Girl High and Boy High that might help reproduce privilege. Informed by my knowledge of ongoing gender inequalities in higher education and the labour market, I was also interested in the extent to which gender inequality was addressed and challenged in each of these settings but most especially in Girl High.

Research Sites and Recruitment: Girl High and Boy High

Selecting the specific research sites from among all single-gender, elite private schools in the Toronto area was a matter of identifying criteria—such as tuition, upper year curriculum (such as offering Advanced Placement courses), religious affiliation, and size—and finding single-gender matches across that criteria. I ultimately selected Girl High and Boy High because of their shared characteristics. While I was collecting data, tuition at both schools was around $20,000 per year per student, plus a one-time fee of $5,000 for new students and an annual expected family donation of at least $1000-$2000. Aside from their similar tuition, Boy High and Girl High share other similarities making them useful comparative cases. Both schools offer AP courses to their upper-year students, maintain tutoring and outreach programs, and lack a strong religious affiliation. The boys’ school has a slightly smaller graduating class than the girls’ school, but both school populations are small relative to their public school counterparts, at about 100 in each graduating class, and boast similarly small teacher to student ratios. Unlike Boy High, Girl High offers a boarding option. Boarders make up a small proportion of the Girl High student population (approximately 10% of the entire school). Boarders and day students
make concerted efforts—supported by administrators and school funds—to create bridges between the two groups through things like shared events and school-wide open houses within the boarding area. It is also the case that some ‘day’ students boarded in the past. For these reasons, I believe the boarding option at Girl High does not present issues regarding comparability. In classroom observations, there were no ways of knowing which girls lived on campus.

**Method**

The major aspect of this research design was participant observation. Fieldwork took place at both research sites somewhat concurrently. Since the goal was comparative, it was important to be at the sites simultaneously as much as possible, because each research site shared a similar calendar of events, such as March Break, university deadlines, report cards, grad ceremonies, etc. I began at Boy High in April 2008 and concluded my research in April 2009. I began at Girl High somewhat later (in October 2008) due to some logistics on their end, and concluded my research there in September 2009. I visited Boy High on 60 different days for a total of approximately 205 hours. I visited Girl High on 34 different days for a total of approximately 114 hours. I concluded my fieldwork later than the point at which I had reached theoretical saturation because I wanted to ensure I had comparable information across the entire school calendar; because I started later at Girl High, I did more fieldwork there in the new school year beginning in September 2009 because I had already experienced September at Boy High the preceding year. In both schools I visited classrooms in math, science, social science, and the humanities in an effort to observe classes across a variety of disciplines. For the most part I was able to observe the same classes across both schools. Where a course was not offered in both
schools or a scheduling conflict prevented my attending the same courses, I selected a course within the same discipline and at the same grade level.

Because of my interest in how these students successfully transition into higher education, I focused primarily on grade 12 students (although occasionally I encountered grade 11 students and, rarely, grade 10 students). I selected this age group of students because I imagined that the strengths and mechanics of the elite private school would be most apparent during this time of high stakes and stress when students are preparing for university. It made visible the work and effort of all involved, so there is no mistaking that this aspect of the reproduction of privilege is somehow seamless and straightforward. It is in this final year of high school that students attempt to capitalize on the long-term development of their meritorious traits (Khan 2011). I also learned through data collection that students in their final year play a truly active role in the classroom and in shaping their educational outcomes (see Chapter 4), capitalizing on the independence and sense of entitlement their parents have been developing since early childhood (Lareau 2003). (Given the somewhat older ages of the students as well as the difficulty with informed consent in an ethnographic project, where interactions unfold in an unplanned fashion, parent consent was rendered unnecessary. An information letter for parents was posted to each school’s website instead.)

In addition to attending grade 11 and 12 classes, I also attended as many weekly assemblies as possible. I attended a small number of university presentations at Boy High, and attended a university information meeting intended for grade 11 and 12 students and their parents. I attended graduation ceremonies. I also attended a semi-formal dance held at Boy High (attended by many Girl High students).
In the spring of 2009, I interviewed the head administrator of each school (the headmaster at Boy High and principal at Girl High), senior school heads, and head university counsellors. These individuals are instrumental in the everyday operations of the school, the encouragement of students, and the negotiation of parent requests, student needs, and institutional goals. But they are also important figureheads, mouthpieces, and intended role models. These interviews were semi-structured. As other researchers studying up have found, these interviews required extra management to prevent the participant from taking control of the interview and taking a question wherever they wanted it to go (Thomas 1993). This was mostly true for the headmaster and principal, who spoke in fairly generic, idealistic ways. That said, they still provided insights into the vision the school held for its graduates. Interviews with school administrators (n = 4) focused on attracting prospective families, school goals, the nature of the classroom, extra-curricular activities, such as school clubs and outreach programs, and their perception of the school’s strength relative to other types of schooling. Interviews with the head university counsellor at each school (n = 2) focused on the role of the counsellor in university application and admissions decisions, how university placement fits into the larger goals of the school, and the various ways in which parents and students navigate the university application process and the range of choice in the university landscape (locally to internationally). Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour and forty-five minutes\(^{17}\). The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder and were later transcribed.

I also conducted exit interviews with nine students (5 boys, 4 girls) in May and June 2009. The purpose of these interviews was to check my observations against their understanding of their school, and use their responses as a kind of closure to the research. Although I originally intended to interview more students, the timing of these interviews coincided with a busy period

\(^{17}\) All consent forms can be found in Appendix B. Interview guides can be found in Appendix C.
for students when many upper year students are preparing for AP exams and spending less time at school. This made it difficult to connect with and schedule interviews with students. Regardless of the smaller pool of interviewees, I was still able to engage students with a reflection on their time at Girl High and Boy High and check my observations against their reflections. The interviews focused on the universities and programs they considered, the factors important in selecting a university, how they made their final choices, their opinions on gender-segregated education, and how they compared themselves to their peers in the state-funded system as well as peers in other area private schools. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Finally, each of the research sites produces a number of important written documents, such as promotional material sent to prospective families and student guides for current students and their families. These written records reveal important information about institutional expectations, student life, rules and regulations, the university counselling office, etc. As I moved about the schools (including online), I collected these materials. They include a selection of magazines intended for each school’s community, as well as a funding newsletter from Girl High and a strategic planning document from Boy High. I also requested and received the prospectus from each school’s admissions office. Most of the documents under examination are intended to promote the school to the school community (including potential donors) and prospective families. Given this, these documents are intended to highlight—and perhaps even exaggerate—the features of the school deemed most appealing and most in line with expectations. The prospectus produced by each school highlights much of what we would

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18 Boy High did not publish a funding newsletter that could be considered comparable to Girl High. Instead, most of their fundraising efforts were contained within the magazines published for the community (including alumni). At the time of my research, Boy High had just emerged from a period of strategic planning, and therefore these documents were widely available throughout the school.
expect of any private school—challenging curriculum including AP courses; resources devoted to math, science, and the arts; a variety of extra-curricular offerings, including student-run clubs and councils; athletics; a focus on school community; tutoring and other forms of extra help; and an emphasis on developing the whole child. The remaining documents are items distributed to the school community—current students and parents, alumni, and staff—and reinforce what is contained within the prospectus. In a sense, these documents reinforce why parents are paying private school tuition or why an alumnus should (continue to) donate to the school. They are essentially promotional materials.

Access

Researchers who have worked on elite populations discuss the importance of connections to gain access (discussion to follow), and my experience was no different. My thesis committee urged me to consider this issue as soon as I made known my research interests. They asked if I had any connections to private schools. Because I did not have connections, a committee member put me in touch with a colleague who had connections with an administrator at an elite Toronto girls’ school. Although this particular school did not fit the needs of my study, I hoped the contact would provide advice and possibly some sponsorship to help me gain access to other elite private schools in the area. My meeting with this individual began with her essentially vetting my interests and also vetting me; she asked a series of questions about my research interests, my educational background, and my degree of experience with elite private schools. I can assume she was satisfied because she began to offer some tips about how to proceed. Her suggestion was to begin with the executive directors of the provincial and national independent school associations. She specifically said, “Let’s just say it would be imprimatur.” I did indeed
meet with these executive directors of the national and provincial independent school 
associations. In my introductory letter and email to the heads of each school I made mention of 
these meetings with the executive directors, saying that the directors believed the schools would 
likely be interested in participating in research of this nature. It seemed this was enough. If 
anything, it offered a way in and was a way to ground the conversation when I met with the 
administrators for the first time.

Although I had the imprimatur of the provincial and national association directors, there 
were gatekeeper hoops to jump through before the research was given a green light. The process 
was the same in both schools. After first emailing and mailing a letter of introduction to the 
heads of each school, I received an email reply from the senior school heads of each school with 
an invitation to come in to the school to discuss the research. (I never did get a reply from either 
the Boy High headmaster or Girl High principal.) I came to these meetings with a brief research 
proposal that outlined my research interests and provided some information about my research 
background and my profile as a graduate student. Although it is fair to say that the nature of the 
meeting felt equitable and centred on my research interests and my ideas for how my research 
would proceed at their school, it is also fair to say that I was being assessed. I was asked about 
where I earned my undergraduate degree and we spoke about my PhD program. I was also asked 
whether I attended a private school and, upon learning that I did not, each senior school head 
asked which high school I had attended. This strikes me as interesting because there are so many 
high schools in Toronto and the surrounding suburbs. Were they hoping to recognize the name 
of my high school? The heads also asked where I grew up. I am now almost embarrassed to say 
how specific (although truthful) I was in my answer, telling them that I was from Unionville 
rather than from Markham (a large suburb of Toronto, of which Unionville—a somewhat
wealthier section—is a part). In retrospect, however, I see now how aware I was of being assessed by these individuals who held the power of granting me access to these research sites (and, ultimately, to pursue my planned research and complete my PhD). I was no insider, but I did not want to be seen as an outsider either, figuring that the gatekeepers would be more inclined to accept “one of their own.” I was trying to carefully manage the insider/outsider role, putting on a persona that might improve my chances of being widely accepted into the field.

Beyond some of these initial assessments of who I was, the gatekeepers also wanted some assurances about what my interests were and what kind of impact my research might have on the school. I had the feeling that they wanted to make sure my research was not too controversial and that I wanted to do nothing more than present at some conferences, publish in some journals, and fulfill the requirements of my PhD. And I said as much. They specifically raised the subject of the popular press, wanting explicit (though unwritten) assurances that I had no interest in publicizing my research in non-academic media. The senior school heads agreed to the research on the spot, subsequently signing a consent letter (see Appendix B). I was eventually passed on to somewhat subordinate administrators who would be my handlers during my time at each research site. Although I had only a little bit of contact with the senior school heads after that point and even less contact with the head and principal beyond my interviews of them, all continued to be very friendly when I saw them in the hallways and parking lots.

I soon learned that access was not a one-time-only event but a process. While in itself this was not surprising, I was still somewhat surprised at the frequency to which I believed I was being “sized up” on an ongoing basis. In many cases, this sizing up was related to privilege as people tried to gauge whether I was part of their world and how well I fit into this world. For example, students and teachers continually asked if I had attended a private school. When I did
not initially fit into their world by not having attended a private school, they tried to gauge my place by asking where I went to high school. This was equally common among administrators, teachers, and students. During one of my first days of participant observation at Boy High, the students were enthusiastically talking about an upcoming fundraising event. This event focused on fashion and dance and was popular because it also incorporated female students from the surrounding private schools. Through their conversation it became clear that one of the local girls’ schools had not permitted their students to participate in the fundraiser. The Boy High students spoke about this with a hint of pride in their voice, as though it was proof of how cool they and this particular event were. In the context of this conversation, one of their first questions to me was: “Did you go to [name of girls’ school in question]?” I had some familiarity with the school through my initial search into prospective research settings and could therefore talk about the school with a bit of familiarity, seemingly leading them to believe I was more intimately familiar than I actually was, perhaps even an alumnae. Being perceived as an insider in this moment felt like some kind of success. In reality, I did not even know how to accurately pronounce the name of that particular girls’ school. Even though I was already in the field, past the official access point of the gatekeepers, there were these ongoing smaller, everyday moments in which my insider/outsider status was assessed.

There are many times in my field notes where I note that I am being sized up on the basis of my appearance (in my notes I call this ‘eyeballing’). This eyeballing was different in each context, however. The gatekeepers at Boy High occasionally sized me up in the hallways, particularly on their special non-uniform days. I suspect the eyeballing was for the same reason that the male students at the school also eyeballed: they were evaluating my appearance vis à vis sexuality. As a young, female researcher at an all-boys’ school, my presence was highly visible.
There was more than one time that this fact was commented on by a gatekeeper or teacher, such as the (female) social science teacher at Boy High who called me a “fly on the wall…a really pretty fly on the wall” to her students. And there were multiple times that I experienced the gaze of the male students. These moments were reminders of my gender and confirmation that I was correct to anticipate that my gender would be a very visible aspect of my identity in the boys’ school. At the girls’ school, I was also often sized up on the basis of my appearance. There were a few times when I could feel the judging eyes of a female student on me. When I could catch a glimpse at the student, she would be looking at my shoes or some other aspect of my appearance. It actually got to the point where I became slightly self-conscious about wearing the same one or two pairs of shoes (although not enough to purchase more shoes). Although muting my gender was particularly difficult to achieve in an all-boys setting, it was almost equally (but differently) difficult to achieve in an all-girls setting; I could not ‘neuter’ myself (Pascoe 2007) in an all-girls setting where sisterhood and femininity (to be discussed in Chapter 5) were overarching themes and where the students bonded over items like purses, shoes, and other markers of appearance.

Access versus Acceptability

In field research, access to a site is only the beginning stages of accessing the population. Access depends on building rapport with participants within the field. As will be discussed shortly, the literature on studying up has mixed messages regarding access and rapport, with some sociologists warning of hostility while others stating that claims about hostility have been exaggerated. In collecting the data for this project, I experienced what felt like hostility and what felt like open doors.
The hostility was at Girl High. One teacher—Mr. Richards, a math teacher—continued to ask about my research goals in a way that seemed rooted in suspicion (as though I was spying on behalf of the school). It also seemed rooted in his lack of experience with the particular course of his I observed. Mr. Richards eventually went as far as suggesting that my research had not received ethical approval by my university, thereby making me seem somehow unethical and not credible. He demanded to review the research protocol I had submitted to my university’s research ethics review board. I had ongoing conversations with my thesis supervisor who also connected with the research ethics manager at the University of Toronto for the social sciences to discuss how to proceed. Mr. Richards was supplied with the research protocol as well as an abridged version of my dissertation proposal. In the end, he admitted his treatment of me was related to his frustration with the way the school administrators announced my research at the school. Even after this, there unfortunately remained a palpable amount of tension in his class, and I carried this tension with me throughout my remaining months in the field. I actively avoided eye contact with him during class time and was even more cautious of how I interacted with the students in this class. This was difficult at times because the class size was small and the students were particularly friendly with me.

The situation with Mr. Richards was underscored by a less warm and receptive environment at Girl High compared to Boy High. At Boy High, I could park my car and enter the school and its classrooms without having to let anyone know. I received access to things I did not even request, such as an internal email account (allowing access to internal school documents available to parents, students, staff, and teachers), student grades, the staff lounge, and parental contact information. My liaison at the school gave me keys to his office and said that it was my office, too. Boy High was also more open about student issues, such as difficulties with students
and drugs and alcohol. Not one teacher at Boy High required me to send them a list of dates they could expect me in their classes. Their doors seemed wide open to me at all times. There were even a couple of times that I slipped in late due to poor road conditions during winter, and we joked as a class about how I needed a late slip. On another occasion, I arrived at a special event—a semi-formal dance—without the senior school head knowing ahead of time that I would attend. When he saw me he seemed surprised but remarked “this is a great addition to your study!” This was despite the fact that at least one student had to be escorted out that night for drunkenness, a potential source of embarrassment for the school.

At Girl High, I had to sign in and out, wear a very visible “Visitor” sticker, was never given access to their internal website (something they initially said they would look into), and had no special parking privileges. I rarely saw my liaison and was far from being offered any kind of office space; more than once I hurriedly jotted field notes in a bathroom stall. In terms of openness, administrators never divulged any issues about students around drugs and alcohol, although I am aware of there being issues (this awareness coming from the students I befriended who were far more open). Rarely did I hear a story that involved disciplining students for a serious matter. The principal told me a discipline-related story in our interview; it was meant to illustrate a point that she wanted to make about avoiding heavy-handed discipline, and she glossed over the details of the story (I heard these details later from one of the students). More than one teacher required that I send a list of dates they could expect me. Many teachers at Girl High also directed me to a particular chair and desk to sit in (in one case, in a corner). Doing so, they communicated to me that I was an outsider and not completely welcome in their classroom. If I was even one minute late for a class, I chose to miss it altogether to be consistent with how the students behaved; most Girl High teachers were quite stern about lateness. This simply never
happened at Boy High. While ‘hostile’ seems too strong a word, it was certainly less of an open and welcoming environment. Throughout my time at Girl High, my status as a researcher seemed always present to the teachers. After only a couple of months in the field, it felt as though I might be “kicked out” at any moment.

Girl High seemed very protective of its students, and this too resulted in my perception of hostility toward my research. The teachers at Girl High asked more questions about consent compared to the teachers at Boy High. This included a Girl High teacher—Ms. Green, an AP Economics teacher—who grilled me on everything from how her students could give their consent to how I was going to destroy my data when my research concluded, questions I thought were more suitable for gatekeepers to ask. Like Mr. Richards, Ms. Green also later expressed frustration at her school’s administration and how I was announced\(^\text{19}\). When I consider whether I would re-enter this kind of field again for other research, these experiences are among the first that come to mind. I often felt like I was researching in a very suspicious environment.

\textit{Analysis}

Data analysis occurred on an ongoing basis via the process of recording, transcribing, and analyzing field notes on a daily basis. With one or two exceptions, I transcribed and analyzed field notes on the same day they were recorded by hand. I made use of analytic memos containing initial impressions of activities, patterns, and contradictions (Glaser and Strauss 1967). The ongoing analysis of field notes complemented the analysis over the summer break in July and August 2008 and 2009 and when data collection ended altogether in September 2009. I

\(^{19}\) In general, the teachers at Girl High seemed antagonistic towards the administration at Girl High. Relations seemed far less collegial than they did at Boy High. I believe that my experiences with Mr. Richards and Ms. Green reflect this tension; it wasn’t me per se that they were frustrated by but rather how their school’s administration had chosen to take on a research project that had more of an effect on the teachers’ classroom environments than it did on administrators.
read and re-read the transcribed field notes, interviews, and the analytic memos I had created during my ongoing analysis. Doing so allowed me to step back in a way that did not seem as possible when immersed in the field. Field notes, interview data, and school documents were coded using thematic categories generated from the data and from earlier research (Burawoy 1998). It was at this point that I started to develop codes and use qualitative analysis software (QSR NVivo) to make use of these codes.

Because the private school community in Toronto is small, and because the schools themselves are also small, ensuring confidentiality is challenging. In order to ensure confidentiality of participants in the schools and the schools themselves, I have chosen to change or switch around some of the details concerning teachers, students, and the physical settings of each school. Unless something seems relevant to the analysis—such as the subject matter a particular teacher is teaching—I have changed details of that nature. I have also altered the details of some circumstances, again in the interests of protecting the identities of my research participants. I am intentionally vague in some places about details that may jeopardize the confidentiality of the schools. Finally, I have not provided citations for many of the quotes pulled directly from school documents (like newsletters and promotional items) or school websites. In some cases, I have avoided using quotes altogether, doing my best to paraphrase the contents of those documents instead.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that I did not interview teachers. At the time of the study, focusing on students and administrators seemed adequate; my interests were centred on students and the kind of educational environment in which they were educated. Although the
teachers were present in the classroom and my field notes often make reference to them, they were never an explicit focus. Once I began to map out each chapter and began to write, it became obvious that interviewing teachers would have complemented my data. This is particularly true in Chapter 4, where I explore the teacher-student relationship in elite private schools as a mechanism of the reproduction of advantage. Were I starting this project over again, I would include teachers (please see conclusion of Chapter 4 for this discussion).

I also acknowledge that Girl High and Boy High are unique educational environments, making generalizability impossible. However, generalizability was not a goal of this research project. What happens at Girl High and Boy High hinges on the institutional contexts set up by administrators, the Boards, and teachers. This is evident in each of the three substantive chapters to come. Therefore, one should expect to see differences in elite private school settings. Furthermore, as will be made evident in Chapter 6 on university choice, one can expect differences according to location, as some of the decisions students and their families make in their final years in private school are rooted in location.

In the final section of this chapter, I trace the ways the literature on studying up has evolved, highlighting and engaging with the major themes, namely access, hostility, and suitable methodology. I situate my experience as a researcher at Girl High and Boy High vis à vis the studying up literature as well as insights from ethnographic education literature as it relates to self-presentation. I use my perspective as a young, white, female, middle-class researcher in exclusive single-gender private schools to shed light on how a different class position can be an asset because of what it allows us to see (rather than a liability to be overcome). In doing so, I also point to the gaps in the literature on studying up. In particular, my experiences highlight the
need for the studying up literature to pay greater attention to how youths occupy a privileged position.

THINKING ABOUT CLASS IN A PRIVILEGED ENVIRONMENT

Historically, the literature on studying up consisted of only a small number of contributions, lending the study of elite populations a kind of mythical status. It was full of warnings of hostile and closed populations (Ostrander 1993; Thomas 1993; Weinberg 1968). But as more researchers began to study up beginning around the mid-1980s, a more experience-based discussion of what a researcher can expect and the practicalities of studying a more elite population came to the fore. A contemporary sociologist interested in studying a privileged population can turn to the literature to strategize over how best to access this population, prepare for interviews, and manage one’s self-presentation (see for example Harvey 2011; Hunter 1995; Ostrander 1993; Thomas 1993; Walford 1994). Although still a small set of the sociological literature, the studying up literature manages to shed light on some crucial aspects of researching privileged populations that differ from studying a population with relatively less privilege. In particular, I highlight access and self-presentation, both of which tie directly to my experience as a white, female, middle-class researcher. I begin with a discussion of the literature before making links to my experience.

Access

Access has been a major focus in the studying up literature. The dominant message offered by early studying up researchers suggests prospective researchers of the privileged should anticipate hostility and a closed community (Weinberg 1968). Decades later, however,
contemporary researchers who have successfully studied elites conclude that difficulties of access have been over-emphasized and exaggerated. Many suggest that the early literature may have unnecessarily dissuaded people from researching others with greater economic, social, and political power. Contemporary research makes mention of barriers to access but does so in the context of discussing ways to lower these barriers (see for example Ostrander 1993; Thomas 1993). In my case, I experienced both hostility and openness. Where Weinberg (1968) predicted hostilities on the part of the administration, I found more warmth and openness. I experienced more hostility from teachers, those with lower status in the school settings. The hostilities mainly emerged as a result of dynamics within the settings I had immersed myself in, and seemed largely independent of my research role.

Where the studying up literature is ambiguous on the degree of hostility a researcher can expect in the field, current studying up researchers are unanimous in their belief in the necessity of sponsorship. Generally speaking, the more sponsorship that can be claimed, the better (Walford 1994). Sponsorship can be through a funding agency or a respected university connection, but the most powerful connection is personal sponsorship. Strategy may also be important to accessing respondents. Ostrander (1993), for example, began ‘at the top’ with each of her three studies centred on elite populations. Her research on women of the upper-class began with a strategic decision to approach a woman who was deemed the most privileged and the most well-known for her social and volunteer work in the privileged community. This was my approach to accessing the field; as discussed, I began with an administrator at an elite private school I did not intend to approach for my research, and followed her strategically-based

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20 The use of sponsorship for gaining access to a population is not unique to the study of elites. Studying non-elites may also involve sponsorship. That said, sponsorship is a particularly dominant focus in the literature on accessing elite populations, suggesting that researchers’ experiences in accessing different kinds of populations have led them to conclude that sponsorship is uniquely important for the study of elites.
suggestions regarding how to access my desired schools in a roundabout way. Other researchers can rely on ‘self-sponsorship’; they use their history with the organization to access the field, like Khan’s access to his former elite boarding school, St. Paul’s (Khan 2011).

The Researcher Role and Self-Presentation: Age, Gender, and Class

Reflexivity involves a self-reflection on the researcher, based on the belief that the researcher is part of the research context and a contributor to it, not an objective observer and describer. Reflexivity can include reflections on self-presentation and research site access through to data analysis. Applied here, my reflexivity developed over the course of the research, beginning with questions of self-presentation and leading to a more complex examination of the impact of my social class background on my understanding of Girl High and Boy High. Self-presentation in particular was an important consideration, as I discuss later, because self-presentation is typically of central importance to access and accessibility to an ethnographic field. I outline both of these dimensions of reflexivity in the sections that follow.

Generally speaking, the studying up literature does not contain a great deal of reflexivity about the researcher role. Furthermore, I incorporated a variety of methodologies—not just interviews, the predominant method used by those studying up—and these methodologies had me interacting with adults and children alike. For these reasons, I looked to the literature on research in school settings as I began to grapple with self-presentation in the field. In particular,

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21 In keeping with an awareness of the intersections of class and gender, it is important to acknowledge race. Race was a salient but not particularly apparent aspect of my experience as a white researcher in these privileged contexts; this is because Boy High and Girl High are dominated by whiteness. My own white privilege was consistent with the school environment. Through most eyes, I looked like their teachers, their administrators, and their peers. Private schools increasingly make efforts to reach and accept students from diverse backgrounds, at least in part to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of Toronto. Nevertheless, white students still make up the majority of the student population. As a middle-class, white, female researcher in these environments, class and—particularly at Boy High—gender were the most apparent aspects of my experience because they were the identity axes where I most differed. The salience of race was most apparent in its silence throughout my research experience.
there has been some useful reflexivity that is helpful for an ethnographer engaging in research at elite single-gender private schools (Mandell 1988; Thorne 1993; Pascoe 2007). Age and gender are particular dimensions of social location that I anticipated would be central to my ability to access the field and build rapport at Girl High and Boy High. From the earliest days of preparing my thesis proposal, I investigated how other researchers managed age and gender. I turn to each of these in turn, beginning with age.

Age is all but ignored in the ‘studying up’ literature; the privileged are presumably all adult. Sociology of education researchers are justified in being reflexive about this dimension and taking steps to minimize their “adultness” as age is a clear marker of difference between the adult research and the student research participant. Barrie Thorne (1993) has written extensively on her experiences as an ethnographer within elementary schools among young children. She borrows from Mandell (1988) in her use of the term “least adult”. Mandell and Thorne both detail ways to lessen the social distance between themselves and the children they study, such as engaging in play when and how children do. Dress is another way a researcher can try to alleviate some of the distance between the researcher and student population (see also Bettie 2003). Although Thorne tried to minimize her adult power it is impossible to erase age altogether; no one ever mistook her for a child. At best, the researcher can avoid positions of authority and follow how students speak with other adults to establish allegiances with children and avoid collusion with authorities. As a junior researcher preparing to enter unfamiliar research sites, the work of Thorne and Mandell offered some guidelines for behaviour to help build rapport at Girl High and Boy High.

Pascoe (2007) builds on Mandell and Thorne by conceptualizing what it means to be “least gendered”. Pascoe’s interest in masculinity required her to hang out with the boys at her
research site (a high school) and she used dress as part of a ‘least-gendered’ strategy. Beyond dress, she would also discuss ‘guy topics’, engage in the kind of competition that boys engage in, and carry herself with confidence. Pascoe believed that this approach to interaction muted her gender difference, where she could be seen “if not as an honorary guy, at least as some sort of neutered observer” (Pascoe 2007:181). As with the work of Thorne and Mandell, Pascoe’s experiences as a female researcher conducting research among male research participants acted as a guideline for lessening the social distance that might arise from gender difference between researcher and participants, as was the case at Boy High.

These “least” approaches to age and gender offer some guidelines on how to manage the age and gender differences when entering a site as an ethnographer. I used these notions of least-adult and least-gendered as organizing principles for my entrance into the field; I wanted to blend in to the school environments and be seen as more of a student than as a researcher or teacher, an association that could be made by virtue of my age. At Boy High, I also wanted to neutralize my gender as much as possible for the purposes of research but also to avoid being caught in the gaze of some of the male students. I thought carefully about the clothes I wore and how I carried myself in the hallways. I also monitored how I behaved in class, such as laughing when students were laughing, even when the teacher was not. For example, during one of my first days at Boy High I heard a number of students share poems during their creative writing class. Most of these poems focused on girls, relationships, and sexuality. One student’s poem vividly described his favourite pornography as well as his masturbation to that pornography. This was much to the delight of his peers who found his poem quite funny, surely at least in part because their teacher, Ms. George, looked unimpressed. I was keenly aware of students looking my way. This moment felt like an important point where I could demonstrate a kind of
allegiance to the teacher or to the students. Although my actions had as much to do with neutering my gender—not taking offense to a poem that described women in offensive ways—it also had to do with opting out of a reaction associated with those in positions of authority, their teachers, much like Mandell (1988) describes.

The notion that I could lessen the impact of my age and gender was a focus as I entered the field. It was something I was working to achieve. This singular focus is present in my field notes, where early reflection is focused on moments when my age and gender are particularly salient or the moments when I feel like I have overcome those differences, like the many times I remark on the male students burping and scratching themselves in front of me. In fact, I took these moments as signs of success at my integration, this field note from Boy High being just one example: “They pick at their butts and groins in front of me all of the time. I guess I’m blending in.”

My focus soon expanded to include thinking about the ways in which my self-presentation was influenced by my social class background. Ostrander (1993, 2003) reflects on her class standing relative to the elite populations she has researched, observing that middle-class people are inclined to minimize class by claiming that people really are all the same; power and privilege are erased by a certain level of education and income. Indeed, I believe I was so focused on gender and age because my own middle-classness had made social class almost invisible to me. I believe that, had my family background been working-class, my earliest reflections and planning would have included social class alongside age and gender, because the gap between a working-class researcher and those in exclusive educational settings like Boy High and Girl High is larger and more apparent than that experienced by a middle-class researcher. I was more concerned with “fitting in” according to my age and gender, not

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connecting “fitting in” to class. I did not spend much time considering how class might enter into how I was positioned within the research sites, beyond this statement in my thesis proposal:

Socioeconomic status is an obvious dimension that I must attend to, because their privileged position is not one that I share, nor do I share any common ground in terms of private school attendance. If respondents ask where I went to high school (and I suspect they will, as I have already been asked this question in my visits to each school), I will tell them that I attended a high school in Unionville. There is no benefit or point in denying where I have received my education. In fact, is possible that this information will create an avenue of communication: living in Unionville carries with it a certain cachet to many, because it is associated with wealth. Many families in Unionville send their children to a private school. If inquiring into my education is one of the first things individuals in the research site will do upon meeting me, and they learn that we share some familiarity with a particular locale, it may provide one of the first entryways into communication. Of course, this is just one possible scenario, and it remains to be seen how significant or insignificant my education will be among this particular group.

Although I recognized that I was not a part of the privileged group and, in another part of my dissertation proposal, called this a potential advantage because of the vantage point it would offer, I had a misguided understanding of the boundaries around class. I had flattened what it means to be middle-class (Ostrander 2003), putting myself in the same category as the people I was about to study. I was naïve to situate myself as an insider on the basis of the possibility that they knew the place I was raised and went to school. Over time, however, our class differences became harder to ignore than I initially anticipated.

I am not disenfranchised. But those attending private schools are exceptionally enfranchised. My insider/outsider status vis à vis class was a lens through which I observed the schools. I was routinely able to pinpoint the aspects of the private schools that were completely different than my own secondary school experience²². For the most part, these moments came

²² It is difficult to make precise comparisons between Boy High, Girl High, and my high school, but there are some notable contrasts that can be made. My high school was quite large, and brought together students from a variety of social class backgrounds. A very small proportion of students had their own cars, suggesting a wealthy family background, while other students lived in lower-income townhouse and apartment complexes. My high school was
through feeling incredulous over the kinds of resources each school enjoyed and the taken-for-grantedness and obliviousness of privilege. Money was a particular source of comparison. Although actual money was largely absent in each setting, it played a predominant role in the day-to-day of the schools in a way it did not in mine. Specifically, it was about giving money away in keeping with the historical and ongoing notion of noblesse oblige. For example, students at Boy High had to donate money on each of their special non-uniform days; paying to wear your regular clothes was part of an emphasis on fundraising in each setting. At my uniformed high school, you just wore your own clothes on “civies’ day” and that was the end of it. Most of the fundraising events at Girl High and Boy High were longstanding events, like the fashion and music show discussed earlier. Another example was a week in September at Girl High devoted to raising funds for a local organization which then distributes the funds to other local charities. Through daily events like ‘guess the number of jellybeans in the jar’ or ‘find all of the blue-coloured stickers throughout the school’, the week resulted in an enormous amount of funds raised for local organizations. This is because students would pay to guess the number of jellybeans in the jar. I was struck by the sheer number of these events. But what surprised me even more is that the majority of the fundraising efforts had substantial prizes attached to them. In my months of research, there were at least 6 Blackberry smart phones awarded, concert tickets, as well as box seats at Toronto Raptors basketball games, Toronto Blue Jays baseball games, and Toronto Maple Leafs hockey games. My first full day at Boy High was the first time immersed in an expanding neighbourhood that had previously been on the outskirts of a suburb. Boy High and Girl High are located in very wealthy neighbourhoods of the city. My high school offered a range of classes across tracks, which at the time were ‘basic’, ‘general’, and ‘advanced’, but did not offer any AP classes. In comparison, Boy High and Girl High offer AP classes and Ontario curriculum classes designed for those intending to attend university. Some students at my high school dropped out or were expelled with an opportunity to attend an alternative school. Most completed high school successfully, with some then making a direct transition into work while others pursued community college or university studies. In comparison, 100% of Boy High and Girl High grads go on to university. During my time at Boy High and Girl High, I never heard of a student failing a course, let alone dropping out or being kicked out.
I heard a long list of raffle prizes for fundraising, and my field notes captured my surprise: “It’s times like this when I compare it to my own school experience…their prizes are much ‘bigger’ or pricier than any we would have had. A Blackberry?!” Fifty/50 draw prizes were routinely in the hundreds of dollars (the pot of course being double, all raised by a school-age population). These prizes were for people who bought raffle tickets, but sometimes there were prizes attached to raising the most funds for a particular cause.

Having been involved in student council when I was in high school, I have some knowledge of what went into fundraising at my high school. Where students at Boy High and Girl High might be entered into a raffle upon donating to a particular cause, the rewards for donating to a cause at my high school were few and far between. For example, in a pledge to raise funds to support the protection of a rare fox in western Canada, donating students received a sticker of a fox as a token of thanks. Raffle prizes were hard to come by and involved going store-to-store to solicit donations, usually unsuccessfully. Compare this to the fashion show fundraiser mentioned earlier (held at Boy High, participants came from Boy High, Girl High, and other surrounding all-girls’ schools). In the two years that I attended the event, they raised over $50,000. This came via ticket and concession sales, and donations. Concessions were donated, like the hundreds of bottles of Pepsi products. Most of the clothing worn by the male and female student models was partly or totally donated by stores (i.e.: they were sponsored by these stores). These were all popular and trendy stores that an average middle-class high schooler would probably find too pricey. In the event that a store was not willing to act as sponsor, the students simply bought the clothes for the show instead. These are examples not just of the wealth available to this population, that they can donate very freely, but also their connections.

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23 A 50/50 draw involves participants purchasing a ticket, which may then be drawn from the hat as the winning ticket. If the participant has the winning ticket, they receive 50% of the pot of money collected through ticket sales. The remaining 50% of the pot is donated to the charity or fundraising cause.
are able to donate a great deal of money to any number of causes that year in the school. They
are able to buy their fashion show outfit if the desired store does not want to sponsor them
(although most do). Their concession treats are donated. Their fundraising prizes are valuable
and donated (by the box owner at the sports arena, for example).

Even a comparison of the classrooms of my high school—something I’ve never spent
much time thinking about—to the classrooms at Girl High and Boy High offers a striking
contrast in resources. Classrooms at Boy High and Girl High were equipped with Smart Boards
(white boards that are also interactive via touch screen and link to a computer). At Girl High,
each classroom contained a printer. Boy High had a couple of classrooms equipped with
computers, and both schools had computer labs for the sole use of students. All machinery was
new and up-to-date. Science labs contained clean equipment in working order, and lots of it.
Although some of the difference is likely generational and related to advances in technology, my
high school did not seem to have the resources necessary to equip classrooms with this kind of
technology. Beyond the equipment, each classroom at Girl High and Boy High was clean,
bright, and furnished with desks and chairs in great condition. The interior decoration and
resources available in these rooms were abundant in both quantity and quality, including posters
and art that adorned the walls, skeletons and brain samples in the biology rooms, and subject-
related books laying around that students could use if interested in reading a bit more on a topic.

The students at the schools also conveyed their privilege through their conspicuous
consumption. The cars in the parking lots were generally new, clean, and manufactured by
luxury brands Lexus, BMW, and Mercedes. I saw my first Rolls Royce parked in the
neighbourhood surrounding Girl High, where some of the girls live. Some of the cars belonged
to the students and not to their parent. During school hours the students had to follow specific
rules about what they were allowed to have with them—at Girl High it was school bags only (no purses), and at Boy High it was books only (no school bags)—but before and after class one could see the embodiment of their wealth. This was particularly true of the girls, where I recognized designer insignias on purses and recognized the expensive boots many wore. Even the paper bags that some toted around when they needed extra storage were from stores that most would consider expensive, like the luxury department store Holt Renfrew. Being middle-class, I recognized many of these items but they were decidedly out of my reach. There were a couple of times where I felt envy over the financial freedom that allowed the students (or their parents) to purchase these things.

Privilege was also evident through the activities the students did over holiday breaks and long weekends. These holidays were often physically apparent—many came back from March Break with deep tans signifying they had escaped the Toronto winter. These holidays were spoken about matter-of-factly, presumably because it was not extraordinary to have gone on such a vacation over March Break. The students would also enjoy travel over their summer breaks. Some of these trips were family vacations. Others were for credit, where students would travel with an organization and, lead by a teacher, do lessons in the morning and then have free time for the rest of the day. Students typically went to Greece, Italy, and France. I recall one interaction in particular a couple of months after the school year began at Girl High. I was walking a step behind a grade 11 student I had sat close to in a social science class; I was fairly new in the school and was looking for opportunities to create conversation with students and had recognized a sticker on her school bag. The sticker was cover art from an album recently released by a well-known alternative rock band out of the UK. Not only did I recognize the album image, but I had also just seen them in concert over the summer. I used this opportunity to strike up a
conversation, asking if she had seen the concert over the summer. Her reply: “No, I didn’t!” Me: “Oh that’s too bad, it was an amazing show.” Her: “Ya, it’s too bad. I was in France though, studying, so I missed it. I heard it was great.” My only reply was “Oh, well it was an amazing show.” I walked away feeling tongue-tied: I had nothing to say about studying in France, very little to say about France itself (I’ve been fortunate enough to do some traveling in Europe, but was in France for a only very short period of time), and I felt intimidated by a 17 year old girl who already seemed more worldly than I. This was a fairly dominant experience: the power of students aged 16 through 18 to make me feel uncomfortable, insecure, and intimidated.

Reflecting on this, I believe my feelings were connected to two issues. First, I was acutely aware that the students did not ‘need’ me but I really needed them for the sake of my research. Second, I was aware of the differences in our class backgrounds. Whether the students were aware of it or not, most of their lives thus far had contained so much of what I recognized as something to aspire to (travel, financial comfort) but was presently out of reach. My middle-class gaze allowed me to see these various signs of wealth, and recognize the privilege that seemed largely invisible to them. But it also resulted in some unexpected feelings of insecurity, discomfort, and intimidation.

Sometimes my discomfort and insecurity had a sense of awe to it, not envy. At graduation ceremonies at both schools, many families came out to see their son, daughter, brother, and sister graduate from high school. At these events, it becomes clear that many of these families and students know each other. This includes male and female students who do not see each other every day in their high schools but evidently see each other in other places because they interact in very easy, friendly ways. Their attire is also very easy-looking. They have a relaxed confidence to them, dressed not too formally but appropriate. I often thought they
looked like they were from the pages of a Tommy Hilfiger advertisement. It is an ease that I did not feel and was therefore notable: “The girls are dressed nicely but not over the top. There is an ease about them—their hair generally down and only just tidy, their attire polished and trendy but not fitted and stiff. They mingle happily together (laughter, smiles, and hugs) and mingle easily with parents.” These confident and easy interactions were true of the boys in attendance as well, who wore suits without looking awkward and uncomfortable and shook hands confidently with parents in attendance. They conveyed their privilege without wearing anything flashy or ostentatious.\footnote{The female students’ attire changed at the semi-formal dance (out of the watchful eyes of their parents and at an evening—not daytime—event). Many dresses were barely covering their behinds, many dresses were low-cut, and most of them looked terribly uncomfortable and unable to walk in their high heels.}

A final vignette that comes out of Girl High: A grade 12 student, Marisa, had befriended me early on. She used a few opportunities of goofing off in class to test the waters, such as browsing celebrity gossip websites on her computer and sneaking glances at me to see if I looked like I cared. After these ‘tests’, she knew I was not an authority figure. She was always very friendly and engaging and curious about who I was and the research I was doing. One day in Ms. Monaco’s English class, I was chatting with a small group of students; they were beginning to hear back from universities with their admissions decisions. Marisa was upset because she had not heard anything yet from a local university even though many of her friends had already received offers of admission. Jessica, another grade 12 student and a friend of Marisa, said “Oh whatever, you’ll get in. All you have to do is call up and say ‘Um, my dad donated so much money that you named a part of the university after him, so, ya…”” Marisa laughed at this, and continued the fake conversation, saying, “If you don’t let me in, my dad will take it away.” We all laughed heartily at this put-on conversation. In a later conversation, I learned that the area of the university funded by a donation from Marisa’s father was where my father had worked for
years as a staff member. This seemed to me like an interesting comparison because it brought into contrast our different class backgrounds: my father was working to earn a living in the specific area of the university that this student joked about her dad had the power to take away because he was wealthy enough to fund it in the first place.

But at the same time, three other related details are worth noting. First, my father is a professional (engineer). Second, one of his university friends has similarly donated money and has a building named after him. Third, I taught in the building named after my father’s friend for one term, as I was earning my doctorate. A moment that seemed to be all about the privilege of this student was a moment where I recognized her privilege but also my own. As a middle-class researcher, working through the boundaries of class and figuring out whether I was an insider or an outsider required a lot of reflection. Others who have studied up and reflected on class have not expressed this challenge. Ostrander (1993), for example, is of a working-class background and her research subjects all elite; she felt a surprising affinity which, on reflection, she knew to be a result of a shared understanding of the significance of class to their lives. Does this preclude the middle-class researcher from having a keen sense of the impact of class on their gaze? Jennifer Pierce (1995) argues that asymmetrical relations in the field are not always clear cut as what you might expect when a researcher takes the role of a paralegal in a law office, in her case. In my case, I have a less privileged background than my research population but am certainly more privileged than other individuals. I was positioned in a range of asymmetrical relations with my research subjects—in terms of age, gender, and class. In being reflexive about class after my fieldwork was complete, I was able to better appreciate the range of asymmetrical relations between myself and those within the field.
CONCLUSION

The literature around “least adult” and “least gender” can be somewhat misleading if interpreted as a formula to follow. In reality, and as Mandell (1988) herself notes, it is impossible to strip away the axes of our social location. Rather than finding ways to strip our age, our gender, and our class, research in any setting is an opportunity to reflect upon the impact of these identity dimensions on research (how our respondents react to us and how aspects like age and gender influence our analysis). Through reflecting on my experience, I recognized how both my gender and class mattered in a way I had not anticipated. I entered into the project believing that I could focus on gender by doing research at private schools that were similar in their class homogeneity. I was holding class ‘constant’, I believed. In reality, class and gender were salient in a very real way in my experience as a researcher as well as in the schools themselves. Being an outsider to elite schooling, I made observations of what seemed to be taken for granted among the school’s populations. This allowed me to see many of the subtle ways that the structure and culture of the school served as an advantage for its students. This was especially true in the upper-year classes where I did most of my observations; at no other time in a high school career is it more important to try to capitalize on any possible advantage—when you are trying to secure a spot in your preferred university, an international university, or a competitive program. The studying up literature would be strengthened by incorporating more reflexivity into discussions of how to approach the study of more privileged populations, as well thinking more carefully about the ways in which the study of those with privilege is also influenced by other axes of identity like age and gender.

Based on my experience conducting research in exclusive school settings, I believe the studying up literature would be enhanced if it moved beyond its focus on adults. First, children
and youth also occupy privileged statuses. As products of their family background, they share
the privilege of their parents. Some of that is imparted to them via private school tuition, while
other aspects of that privilege comes via travel, purchases, and the knowledge of the education
system that comes with strong cultural capital. As we know from the research on social
mobility, privilege (or lack thereof) is fairly static across generations. We could reasonably
predict that many of the students attending Girl High and Boy High will continue to be
privileged, enjoy access to exclusive settings, and quite possibly be some of our future economic,
social, and political leaders. With this in mind, as well as Barrie Thorne’s (1993) research on
how children are social actors, it makes sense to think of children and youth as privileged actors
and engage with other researchers on the strengths and challenges of studying this group of our
society.

A second reason to expand the scope to include children and youth is that they are a
factor in accessing the field, most especially with research involving the education system.
Aside from the times that students assessed me by asking about my educational background or
testing the waters around authority, it is also the case that I experienced just how much my
research success depended on their willingness to let me in. Most of the time they were willing
to chat with me or at least tolerate my presence. But there were times it became clear that this
was only when it suited them, like the time I was answering a Girl High student’s question and,
mid-sentence, she completely turned away and started chatting to her friend who had just entered
the classroom. Or how Jason, a normally friendly student at Boy High, could alternate between
being very chatty or almost ignoring me completely depending on his mood. They are actors in
the process of research, particularly in educational research, and deserve to be recognized for
their role in access. They may not be the official gatekeepers in the setting, but they can make or break the research experience.

Weinberg (1968) says that children/adolescents may not know what research is about and may just do a lot of role-playing. On the contrary, these students asked very astute questions about my research. Many asked whether I took observation notes and how the observations would translate into a dissertation, while others asked about how my PhD fit into my career plans and where I would like to teach. All were familiar with advanced degrees, and some were even familiar with the notion of ‘areas of interest’ (i.e.: sub-disciplines like the sociology of education). Just as telling, not a single student ever asked “why do you want to study us?” They seemed to understand why a researcher would want to know more about them and their schools: they are wealthy and are educated at a single-gender school. My presence seemed almost ordinary to most of them. They understood this in a way that is not really captured in the studying up literature, such as in Weinberg’s statement.

The next three chapters constitute the core analysis chapters of this study. In the chapter that follows, I explore the opportunities for advantage embedded within the student/teacher relationship in elite private school settings.
Chapter 4

EDUCATIONAL SAVVY: NEGOTIATING WITH TEACHERS

Mr. Short—an athletic-looking math teacher at Boy High known for being alternately stern and funny—asks for the attention of his calculus students. He wants to know how they want to be tested this year: do they want calculus and vectors to be combined in one exam held during the final exam period, or would they prefer an in-class test for vectors so that the final exam would include calculus only? The students launch into a discussion over the pros and cons of each, democratically taking turns without prompting from Mr. Short, raising different points to consider. The classroom energy is high and the students debate the merits of each alternative with some excitement. The dominant argument is that the students would probably get a better mark if they split the exam into two, because the vectors unit is fresh and they have just recently had a bunch of review classes. Only one student—set apart from the others by his flushed face hanging low between his hands and the panic in his voice—is pushing for just one exam in the final exam period. He is quickly silenced by his peers, mostly grade 12 students, who admonish him and pull rank, pointing out that he’s only in grade 11 and therefore not under the same kind of stress they are experiencing around university admissions. Mr. Short has drawn a calendar for April and May on the white board at the front of the room, and he begins to mark down when people have their AP examinations so as not to schedule his own exams during that time. He says they will not decide today about how and when they will be tested because he wants people to go home, think about it, and look at their schedules for other courses. He ends the discussion after about 20 minutes, and says that they will set it in stone next class.

In Mr. Richards’ calculus class at Girl High, the students have just had Friday’s quiz handed back. They instantly talk among themselves about their mark; most seem dissatisfied
and worried. The students almost immediately ask if this quiz will be included on their upcoming report card. Sam, whose struggle with the material seems mostly the result of a lack of interest and a stronger desire to socialize with her friends in class, asks if they can drop their worst mark in the course. Simultaneously, Krista asks if they can re-take the quiz. Krista is a prefect, made visible through her blazer, and is heavily involved in the school’s theatre program, among other clubs and activities. She also struggles with the material but, unlike Sam, tries very hard; she does her homework, participates in class and, also unlike Sam, seems very concerned over her mark in the course. In response to Krista’s question, Mr. Richards says that he does not do re-takes, but says in a reassuring tone that he “takes everything into consideration.”

Through the sociological literature, we know that privilege is produced via a variety of mechanisms involving the education system. In relation to higher education, for example, the close relationship between private schools and elite higher education institutions can lead to the favourable treatment of private school applicants (Karabel 2005, Persell and Cookson 1985a) and private school students enjoy access to a great number and variety of opportunities that boost their application to even the most selective universities, such as a multitude of school leadership opportunities (Khan 2011, Stevens 2007). The social capital developed among private school students is another notable mechanism that can contribute to the reproduction of advantage (Cookson and Persell 1985). In this chapter, I explore students’ relations with teachers in elite schools as another mechanism of class reproduction among the privileged. While sociologists have studied a number of different dimensions of the teacher/student relationship, we have not focused specifically on the idea that students can be strategic and savvy in their interactions with teachers and use these relationships to garner advantage. I begin with a discussion of the literature that contributes to our understanding of the teacher/student relationship, demonstrating
how it can vary considerably according to social class. Much of this literature is focused on working-class populations and leaves unanswered questions about the nature of the relationship between teacher and student in more privileged settings. When looking at the literature on the schooling of privileged populations, it is possible to see how the student/teacher relationship is one of the ways privilege is reproduced; whether it be that students ‘toe the line’ with their teachers to receive good grades (Howard 2008) or find inspiration and motivation to excel through the expectations of their teachers (Mullen 2010), the student/teacher relationship is associated with student success. This adds to the multitude of other mechanisms rooted in the school environment we know are connected to the reproduction of advantage. One of the contributions of this chapter is to expand what we conceptualize as student effort beyond the idea of conformity and toeing the line to include the effort students put into maintaining particular kinds of advantageous relations with teachers.

THE TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONSHIP

Students’ experiences of schooling can be quite varied, patterned by social class. At working-class schools, work tends to be procedural, with little decision-making or choice required of the students (Anyon 1980, 1981; Bowles and Gintis 1976). Teachers control the classroom, including conducting experiments in science classes on students’ behalves (Anyon 1980, 1981). The education system replicates the social relations of the work world, in that students in working-class schools are taught in a way that mimics working-class jobs characterized by alienation, fragmentation, and low status in the work hierarchy (Bowles and Gintis 1976). Working-class students may also possess an anti-school orientation, part of their peer culture, including resistance to the achievement ideology and teacher authority. The “lads”
in Willis’ *Learning to Labour* actively resisted teachers, schooling, and the academic culture through their counter-school behaviour. For the “lads”, their stronger preference for having a “laff” contributes to the reproduction of the students’ working-class position (Willis 1977). This is not to overstate the power of the students’ anti-school behaviour in reproducing disadvantage; even working-class students who believe in the promise of schooling may find their ambitions thwarted by structural factors (MacLeod 1995). All told, however, researchers tend to find that working-class students are very often alienated from schooling. One manifestation of this is in the teacher-student relationship, which can be strained and even combative. In fact, work in the sociology of education that explores the teacher-student relationship in public schools oftentimes highlights antagonism and contestation. For example, Levinson’s (1998) ethnographic research at a secondary school produced a number of stories about authoritarian teachers and administrators who leave no room for discussions, feedback, or negotiations, while Delgado-Gaitan (1988) finds that student success in high school is determined by their ability to conform to the teachers’ expectations and ignore negative relations with the teacher. And this was certainly the case with Willis’ “lads” and MacLeod’s “hallway hangers” and their relations with their teachers (MacLeod 1995; Willis 1977).

Calarco’s (2011a, 2011b) research on help-seeking behaviour and requests for accommodation among working-class and middle-class students provides a useful illustration about how the teacher/student relationship may vary by social class. Calarco finds that middle-class children were far more likely to show initiative and persistence than their working-class

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25 Her research population is students within four classrooms of approximately 20 students each, ranging from third to fifth grade. All observations were made within a predominantly white school that brings together middle-class and working-class students. Calarco defined students’ social class according to parents’ educational attainment and occupational status. Middle-class children were those where at least one parent worked in a professional or managerial occupation such as lawyer, teacher, engineer, or office manager and had a four-year college degree. Working-class children’s parents worked in blue collar and service jobs like store clerk or daycare provider and had a high-school diploma or some college.
counterparts in the same classrooms, requesting accommodations such as changes in seating arrangements, schedule, and doing group work. As a result, middle-class students had a more customized educational experience (see also Calarco 2011b). These patterns were despite permission or encouragement from teachers. Teachers were amenable, but did not provide explicit instructions at any point in the year that this was expected or appropriate behaviour. But because teachers did respond, middle-class children learned that their initiative and persistence would result in the meeting of their preferences, goals, and needs. The teacher/student relationship involving working-class students was certainly not antagonistic, but it was also notably different than that enjoyed by the middle-class. Calarco’s work is useful because it signals that children can play an important role in establishing the kind of educational environment that fits their needs, but also that middle-class children are more inclined to seek these kinds of accommodations. Her work is also useful because it suggests thinking about the teacher/student relationship as more than just patterned by social class but rather also a potential source of advantage to students, something I return to shortly. Questions remain about whether her findings on the initiative of students and the reception of teachers to this initiative are the same across a number of contexts, including private schools serving a privileged population.

The smaller literature on privileged high schools like Girl High and Boy High tells a very different story on teacher/student relations than described by the likes of Willis (1977). Generally speaking, the teacher/student relationship has not been a distinct focus in the literature on elite schools, although it is possible to glean insight from some notable exceptions. Schools in more affluent neighbourhoods emphasize individuality, creativity, reason, abstraction, and hands-on experience (Anyon 1980, 1981). Teachers control the classroom through negotiation and students appeared to be ‘in charge’ of the classroom. The dominant structural explanation is
that these patterns are a reflection of the economic structure, and relate to what the students, as future workers in a capitalist society, should expect to do in the labour market. In wealthier neighbourhoods, where students are more likely to be from a higher social class family background, schooling can look very different. Students are being prepared to attend the best universities and colleges and work important jobs, where they will manage others, produce ideas, and have an opportunity for innovation and creativity. Anyon’s study of executive elite and professional schools does not speak in much detail about teacher-student relations nor connect this relationship to the reproduction of advantage. And, consistent with Schooling in Capitalist America more generally, there is a lack of attention to students’ experiences or the role they might play in shaping some of these educational processes.

Adam Howard’s (2008) analysis of private schools offers a glimpse into the student-teacher dynamic in a privileged school setting. Students referred to the need to “play the game”, meaning staying in the good books of the teacher through things like being well-mannered, participating in the right kind of service and athletics, and being cooperative rather than challenging or outspoken. They believed grades were assigned somewhat subjectively, so most students connected good grades to good behaviour. Rather than challenging their teachers, they ‘toed the line’ in order to maximize their chances of academic success. Underlying the relations between St. Paul’s teachers and students in Khan’s (2011) Privilege is a sense of ease, respect, and rapport. Students confide in teachers, joke with them, and generally express respect for their teachers. Relations seem congenial, although Khan does not explore the teacher/student relationship as a possible source of advantage for St. Paul’s students. And although Mullen’s (2010) data are not rooted in the study of private schools, they offer some insight into the potentially important role of teacher/student relations. In their reflections on their high school
years, the Southern University and Yale University students in Mullen’s data differ in many respects, including in their relationship with their teachers. Southern University draws mainly working-class students from the surrounding community and is a less-selective state-funded institution, while Yale is an Ivy League institution. Yale students from middle-class backgrounds—some of whom attended a private high school, and most of whom attended schools where college-track is the only track—spoke of the high expectations held by their teachers as motivation. Teachers were a source of inspiration for the students, who wanted to meet their teachers’ expectations because they valued the relationship. Southern students, on the other hand, tended to recall the low expectations of teachers and connected this in particular to tracking.

Common across these works on private schools is that privileged students come to define themselves in relation to their learning in ways that differ from working-class students. Yale students graduated high school with a sense of deservedness—they are “good students” (Mullen 2010). The students of St. Paul’s boarding school learn from their teachers that they are not average or normal students; they learn to relate to their learning not in terms of how much they know, but the kinds of things they know, their capacity for thought, and the strong likelihood that they can make a contribution to existing knowledge (Khan 2011). Similarly, the private school students in Howard’s study attribute school failure to a lack of effort and bad decisions (Howard 2008). In speaking the language of meritocracy, students firmly establish their worth and others’ unworthiness, ignoring or failing to perceive how they benefit from their privilege (Howard 2008; see also Khan 2011, Mullen 2010). In their minds, the effort they put into their academics is what ensures their success. As mentioned, one of the contributions of this chapter is to expand what sociologists of education conceptualize as student effort beyond the idea of conformity and
toeing the line to include the effort students put into maintaining particular kinds of advantageous relations with teachers.

Students from more privileged backgrounds may enter into school environments with a disposition well-suited to seeking these kinds of advantageous relationships with their teachers. We know from Annette Lareau’s (2003) work that middle-class students develop a sense of entitlement that can pay dividends in their interactions with adults and institutions. This is about cultural capital, a product of the family’s social class background. Lareau finds that middle-class parents subscribe to the cultural logic of concerted cultivation, which is about cultivating children’s talents through organized activities outside of the home, talking with adults, and the use of reasoning and negotiation in and outside of the home (Lareau 2003). Perhaps most important here is that this logic of childrearing produces a sense of entitlement in children—a belief in the right to pursue individual preferences, actively manage interactions in institutional settings, including with adults, and learning to expect things to suit their individual preferences. Lareau speculates that concerted cultivation can benefit children in institutional settings like schools, in part because these practices are in sync with the middle-class orientation of schools (Bourdieu 1974; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Lareau and Weininger 2003). Lareau does not go beyond speculation because the children in her study are quite young, so it is not possible to say whether and how concerted cultivation will benefit the children as they mature. Calarco’s research suggests that middle-class students are more inclined to seek their individual preferences and benefit from doing so. Her data show student agency that we might not otherwise predict using the Schooling in Capitalist America structural framework. Yet researchers have not explored how this sense of entitlement and agency can advantage students in later stages in their education, particularly in their transition to higher education. It is also
important to integrate student action—how they are shaping their educational experiences—with the school/work structural framework developed by Bowles and Gintis in *Schooling in Capitalist America*. In other words, we need to explore in greater depth why a teacher would legitimate the more privileged students’ initiatives by accommodating their requests. This is when the school context and structural explanations become particularly important. Furthermore, Lareau’s and Calarco’s data compare working-class and middle-class children, meaning we do not know about the potential benefits of entitlement among the very privileged.

In this chapter, I explore what students do in privileged school settings vis à vis their relationships with teachers to reproduce advantage. I take a concerted look at an area of schooling—the teacher/student relationship—that has received limited attention among researchers of privileged school settings. I find that many students display a sense of entitlement and confidence in their interactions with teachers and show little hesitation in asking teachers to accommodate their preferences. This is not to say that the students are not also putting in effort to learn academic material but rather, alongside this academic work, there is effort involved in negotiating with teachers over aspects of their schooling. The advantages available to students through the relationship with their teachers are improved grades (in tests and assignments but also in year-end grades), improved competitiveness in university admissions as a result of these improved grades, and a sense of ownership and entitlement developed through successful negotiations with their teachers.

Further, Boy High and Girl High teachers do more than not stand in students’ ways or go along with their efforts: teachers facilitate the students’ initiative and sometimes even initiate advantageous arrangements for their students without any student prompting. They facilitate and create new opportunities for students to excel, even if it means additional work for them. In the
big picture, allowing students the opportunity to collaborate with teachers on their education and negotiate with teachers over things like how they are evaluated serves the goals of Boy High and Girl High: to educate the whole child and nurture the kind of qualities the school hopes to produce in its graduates, particularly leadership. Seeking accommodations and negotiating with teachers is consistent with the schools’ (classed) vision for students: that they are future leaders and should therefore be expected and encouraged to show initiative, leadership, and learn through collaboration with their teachers (see Chapter 2). In the vein of Bowles and Gintis’ work on the correspondence principle, the nature of their schooling reflects the realities of the work most will enter. Furthermore, this form of student effort pays dividends in grades and a more tailored classroom environment. This of course serves an additional school goal: ensuring their students get into the best universities and the most competitive university programs.

I contribute to our understandings of the mechanisms of the reproduction of advantage within elite private schools by taking a deliberate focus on the teacher/student relationship as a source of advantage. The previous literature on the teacher/student relationship has largely been confined to schools educating non-elite students, while the limited number of studies on elite educational settings has not specifically analyzed the teacher/student relationship. My data allow me to focus on students, their actions, and the institution. First, the focus is squarely on how students gain advantage in school settings, not how their parents facilitate this process. Second, I pay attention to the agency of students by focusing on what they do within the classroom, including how they interact with teachers. A teacher/student relationship may be amiable, but a certain amount of action and intention is required to transform the relationship into a source of advantage for students. Third, my settings are privileged private school environments. Where much of the literature is based on educational settings with working-class and middle-class
students, private schools are far more homogenous. Boy High and Girl High students, parents, administrators, and teachers are all aligned in their goals particularly as they relate to university. Finally, that Boy High and Girl High serve similarly privileged populations allows me to also see where these processes might vary by the key variant between the schools: gender.

SHOWING THEIR SAVVY: GIRL HIGH AND BOY HIGH STUDENTS TAKE THE REINS

My data suggest that Lareau’s (2003) speculation about the benefit of entitlement via concerted cultivation is accurate; buoyed by a sense of entitlement to have a say over what happens in the classroom and how marks are calculated, Boy High and Girl High students manage to have a hand in their educational outcomes. Practices like those discussed below most obviously have the potential and likelihood to benefit students by increasing the grades reported to prospective universities and consequently boost their chances of admission to the universities and programs that garner respect among this population (see Chapter 6). Taking ownership over their education and trying to have a hand in crafting their experience is taken as a sign of leadership by Boy High and Girl High administrators and teachers. Leadership is a valued trait within these educational settings, and resonates with what the school believes are the qualities of successful graduates (see Chapter 2).

Students are encouraged to show initiative in controlling the classroom, how they are evaluated and the results of those evaluations. The positive reception from teachers serves to reinforce these practices. To the observer, these interactions appear to be more like collaborations than simple interactions or basic indicators of positive student-teacher relationships.
Many of the collaborations between teachers and students at Boy High and Girl High happen day-to-day in the classroom. Not surprisingly, given that they stand to benefit from doing so, the students initiate many of these discussions. For example, students often initiated discussions about scheduling or re-scheduling an assignment or test, as was the case in Mr. Short’s calculus class that began this chapter. Similarly: “Paul is trying to barter for when their next mock [exam] will be, which he’s saying he wants before or after his World Geo [exam]. Mr. Fry does a tally of who is doing what AP exams.” (field note). In this case, Paul’s initiative does not go unheard but rather is responded to positively by Mr. Fry, an AP economics teacher at Boy High, who goes on to consult with the rest of the class over the schedule for their other AP exams. In another example from Mr. Fry’s class, the students come at him repeatedly with complaints about a recent quiz. He ultimately ‘gives in’ to their badgering: “The quiz is out of 12, but he decides to grade it out of eight instead. At this, Jeremy jumps up and pumps his fist. Mr. Fry says, facetiously, ‘Now do you want this included in your report card?’” (field note, emphasis his). Similarly, in Mr. Richards’ Girl High grade 12 calculus and vectors class:

By the end [of class] they are confused, chatty, [and] asking questions just answered, especially during the over 30 minutes they are given to work on a series of questions for homework (while he goes around answering questions). He initially assigned questions due on the next Tuesday (which is their next class following the long weekend), but the girls are in an uproar, some over having a lot due that day and others because it’s the first day after a long weekend. So he changes it to Friday. (field note)

Examples like this indicate that, had students not been forward and even forceful in seeking what would benefit them, it seems unlikely that the teachers in these cases would have adjusted how a quiz was evaluated or the deadline for assigned questions. The students benefit from these conversations in the form of improved grades. But they also benefit in less obvious ways, namely the experience and confidence than can arise from negotiating with their teachers.
This is particularly the case in the examples above because it is students that initiated these negotiations. Their efforts are legitimated and reinforced through the positive response of the teachers. The students learn to take control of their educational experiences and exert some influence and control in the classroom, much like the students in Anyon’s (1980, 1981) affluent professional and executive schools.

Acting in a forward way suggests not only savvy but also entitlement, which at times seemed blatant. In a very explicit example, Alexander participates in a discussion with Ms. Smith, a teacher-in-training in Mr. Stevens’ Canadian Law class, about a recent assignment. The students nearby complain that Ms. Smith marked hard. She says, “why, because I didn’t give everyone a 100?” to which Alexander says “yes, that’s what you’re expected to do around here.” As I note in my field notes, “a few students (the ones who are listening [to the conversation]) agree; no one disagrees.” While it’s probably safe to assume that Alexander is exaggerating in his belief that teachers should be rewarding students 100% on assessments, the significance of this exchange and the consensus among Alexander’s peers who are witness to the conversation is that it suggests students understand the role of teachers to be about serving them in their quest for excellent grades. Instead of seeing negotiations as moments of collaboration in line with the school’s philosophy around the whole child, it is perhaps more appropriate to interpret these negotiations as moments of collusion. This is most clearly apparent in another moment of entitlement, this time at Girl High. Kelly is musing to a classmate about common expectations held in the school; it is evident that ‘extraordinary’—a word she uses pointedly in her conversation—is something Kelly believes she should expect. In talking to her friend Beth about the prospects for university admissions, Kelly says that ‘good’ isn't enough; they need to work on being “ex-STROR-dinary”. A mere three weeks before marks are submitted to Ontario
universities, she talks with Mr. Richards about increasing her mark, as captured in my field notes:

When they are getting their updated marks later [in the class], [Kelly] seems happy with the marks she is getting (and they seem decent! Did I hear 90? Definitely over 80.)...and she asks if it’s possible for her to increase her mark between now and February 9th [the date grades are submitted to Ontario universities]. Mr. Richards says ‘absolutely possible’.

What is noteworthy about this conversation is that Mr. Richards is assuring Kelly that it is possible to increase her grade in a three week span of time, even though no other evaluations are scheduled in that time period. Although it is not clear how exactly they both believe they can increase her grade, it is clear that Kelly is including Mr. Richards in her expectation that this is possible, and he does not resist that inclusion. In her conversation with her classmate and then later with Mr. Richards, Kelly declares an expectation for the extraordinary, and includes Mr. Richards’ assurances in her expectations. Mr. Richards and Kelly’s discussion of Kelly’s mark is specifically centred on a crucially important date—the Ontario university applications deadline. Both Alexander and Kelly, in different ways, suggest the students believe they are entitled to a degree of teacher responsiveness and that teachers are willing to collude with students on what might help ensure they are successful in their applications to university. These actions should be interpreted as rooted in entitlement because it is not just a matter of students having a particular set of goals. Moments in the classroom like those described with Alexander and Kelly convey an expectation alongside the goal. This expectation is perhaps a reasonable one to have, given they are tuition-paying students at an institution that promotes a belief in the promise of their students to be important future leaders of the world.

A typical negotiating pattern is for students to raise the subject of re-testing and dropping a low mark upon receiving results of a recent evaluation, especially as the university admission
deadlines approach. This greater pressure on the students’ marks, most of which are submitted to universities in February, makes students particularly vocal. Greater numbers of students inquire into how to create—not achieve—the highest mark. Students in Mr. Higgins’ Boy High AP biology class ask about options for improving their average before submitting grades to universities, inquiring into dropping their mark for an entire subject unit, not just a mark for a single test or assignment. Although Mr. Higgins does not give in to the request to drop a more substantial portion of their grade in the course, he does agree to drop a test mark and indicates that this has been common practice in his class over the years. Mr. Higgins not only does not close the door on the discussion, he informs the student that grade adjustment is fairly commonplace in his classroom in advance of university application deadlines. Paul—a tall, athletic grade 12 student who walks with an air of confidence and indifference—displays a sense of entitlement when he asks Mr. Fry if he can “just put in a mark” to help boost his chances of receiving admission to his favoured UK university (field note). Mr. Fry’s reaction suggests that he might actually consider the request, as he gives only a small laugh, does not offer an outright refusal, and actually seems pensive. At Girl High, this behaviour was more subtle. In Ms. Monaco’s grade 12 English class, a few of the girls talked in quiet tones among themselves about a recent mark, expressing concern about how it would affect their overall average. In Mr. Richards’ calculus class, a couple of the students jokingly asked the teacher if he was going to “let them” get into university. This came after the students received the results of a recent unit test and were, in the usual fashion, discussing the possibilities for re-grading, re-takes, and dropping marks. In asking—no matter how humorously—about Mr. Richards’ ‘letting them’ get into university, the students are at least partly putting responsibility for their course grade into his
hands, suggesting that their chances of getting into university is more a product of what he does to their grade in the course and not their efforts or abilities.

These findings about student-initiated accommodations are consistent with the findings of the research on middle-class students by Calarco (2011a; see also Streib 2011). This suggests that middle-class and upper-middle-class kids share a sense of entitlement regarding their education and show a willingness to seek out their preferences in the classroom. This entitlement is likely a product of their family background (Lareau 2003) but also seems to emerge from these same classroom interactions with teachers. In a school environment that recognizes this behaviour as acceptable and a sign of leadership and rewards the students’ initiative with improved grades, the students presumably gain confidence in these negotiations and even feel entitled to continue to pursue them. At the same time, Calarco’s middle-class elementary school population and my own population of upper-year Boy High and Girl High students seek accommodations over very different things. The children in Calarco’s study and the students in my research project both seek accommodations for things like changes to how class time is spent. But Boy High and Girl High students also seek accommodations for their grades, suggesting a strong sense of entitlement, perhaps stronger than that felt by the students in Calarco’s study. This is perhaps not surprising in schools set up to encourage student initiative, leadership, and empowerment and that assume students will attend top universities.

In Calarco’s conclusion, she remarks that teachers were generally amenable to satisfying desires for accommodations, despite never encouraging their students to do so (Calarco 2011b). She does not address why teachers might be amenable, but guesses that teachers may simply be giving in to student demands: “they may have found it easier to concede than to start a lengthy negotiation” (Calarco 2011a:25). In contrast, the teachers at Boy High and Girl High generally
do show a willingness to negotiate with students. In fact, many teachers were not just amenable but even willing to initiate this kind of negotiation and collaboration with students. I elaborate on this key difference between Calarco’s study and my own in the section that follows.

*Teachers Legitimating Students’ Educational Savvy*

Although students initiate collaborations, what may be of greater interest and more compelling is that teachers are frequently at the helm of the collaborations. This is particularly striking when compared to the literature on disadvantaged populations where teachers uninterested in feedback, discussion, and negotiation seem to be the norm (Levinson 1998). It is also an interesting dimension of student-teacher relationships that has not been discussed in the literature on more privileged private school populations. It suggests that teachers are willing to do some of the work involved in capitalizing on a teacher/student relationship that can produce benefits for students. Teachers and students collude on creating the best possible outcomes for students vis-à-vis university admissions.

Teachers demonstrate a degree of flexibility over lesson plans and respond to student requests over how to spend class time, solicit student feedback on the effectiveness of pre-planned lesson activities, and do a great deal of ‘coaching’ of the students: they provide encouragement and tips for studying, note taking, and test writing, and practical methods for handling stress during busy times of the school year. For example, teachers ask about the effectiveness of particular teaching tools, like Ms. Green, AP economics teacher at Girl High, who asks about a set of handouts and an interactive website explaining economics; the students praise the handouts and website and they continue to be used the remainder of the school year. Coaching was particularly common in the AP classes I observed, perhaps not surprising in light
of the major exam administered at the end of the school year. Teachers of AP classes connected material covered in class to what the students could anticipate on the exam; provided tips on properly labelling diagrams according to AP standards so that marks could be guaranteed; and provided test-taking tips based on how AP exams are evaluated (such as the one-quarter mark deduction per question for incorrect multiple choice responses). Finally, teachers provide copious hints on evaluations, including advising students of “pop” quizzes, indicating what questions will be on a test or exam, sharing how assignments and tests will be evaluated, and even on rare occasion letting students see test questions in advance. Very rarely was a test not preceded by hints on what to expect.

Teachers lead discussions to select the date and sometimes format of evaluations, as was the case with the example from Mr. Short’s class that began this chapter. In a somewhat similar fashion, Ms. Green (Girl High, AP economics) tells me that “[s]he creates a block of time for a test to happen and presents the class with the block, and then they decide when the test will be.” (field note). Initiating these kinds of discussions and offering that flexibility indicated their willingness to move an already-scheduled evaluation or consult with students on scheduling. From there, students would consult their schedules, discuss among themselves, and vote for their preference. Remarkably, in most cases teachers did not choose to have the ‘final say’, leaving the decision up to the students’ vote.

Teachers also demonstrate a willingness to ‘massage’ students’ marks. Mr. Brown, a grade 12 English teacher at Boy High, coaches his students on strategically selecting the date of their ISP (independent study project) presentations in light of the deadline for grades to be submitted to the universities:

The presentations will start in April, but Mr. Brown tells them that, if they want to go early so that the mark is part of the marks given to the universities [in early
February], then they can arrange to do so. (Kevin and Justin eagerly talk amongst themselves about how they want to do this.) And, if the mark ends up bringing down their total mark, he thinks it is fair to not include that ISP mark after all. (field note)

Mr. Brown is creating an opportunity for his students to improve their mark. Furthermore, he does so even though this involves a case-by-case calculation of marks to derive the best possible outcome for each student. Undoubtedly, calculating and re-calculating each student’s mark in this way creates more work for the teacher; nevertheless, some teachers showed a strong willingness to adapt how final marks were calculated. Mr. Brown was not the only teacher to suggest that he would do a case-by-case calculation in order to best serve the students’ interests.

This is not to say that teachers exclusively served students’ interests and avoided discipline and control. On an almost daily basis, the students at Girl High would be reprimanded for not wearing their school shoes. At Boy High, the necktie was a source of concern as many boys either forgot their tie or did not have it neatly tied. At uniformed schools, and at a time when students are trying their hand at self-expression, this is not surprising and not new (see for example Khan 2011). Students were also frequently reprimanded for talking in class and, on very rare occasion, a student might be sent out of class as punishment (this happened a couple of times at Boy High and never at Girl High during my observations). That said, discipline was not the dominant feature of the classroom. Although my methodology did not include a ‘count’ of instances of discipline versus collaboration, the positive, collaborative interactions between teachers and students seemed far more common than any disciplinary interactions. The teachers generally showed a willingness to discipline students when the offense was difficult to ignore, like an altogether absent Boy High necktie or a pair of brown knee-high boots instead of the plain black ankle shoes Girl High students were required to wear. Teachers and administrators also talked about rare cases of disciplining students over offenses deemed particularly egregious
(and difficult to ignore), such as issues around drugs and alcohol inside and outside the schools.

In most other matters, however, the teachers rarely used discipline as a form of control. Indeed, the kinds of negotiations discussed thus far were sometimes used to ‘incentivize’ good classroom behaviour. This was most commonly seen in Mr. Short’s grade 12 calculus and vectors class. This course is a popular one at Boy High, in part because it is a required course for many of the university majors the boys consider applying to and because it was less challenging than the AP calculus course. In my first year of observations, there were two large sections of the course, which sometimes created an unruly environment. On my first day of observations at Boy High, I note:

Mr. Short mentions their noise and disorder, and mentions a note from the supply teacher from last class who said that they didn’t work great, that she had to constantly remind them that it was an independent assignment. In his desk he has photocopies of two of those assignments that are identical. He is urging the students to come and see him before he hands them back. He urges them not to make the disappointment that he has now even worse. ‘If you come and talk to me, we can talk about it. If I have to talk to you before you come to talk to me, it will be a zero.’ And a few minutes later, he says ‘I could have given it to Mr. Ryan [Head of Academics] for him to deal with…’ And he also points out that they should keep in mind that their grades are about to be submitted for the second time to the universities they applied to. ‘A bad time to get a zero on an assignment.’ And ‘it’s an important assignment, but people should deserve their grades.’

While there are other themes evident in this quote—such as how students should take responsibility for their actions and consider what constitutes ‘deserving’ behaviour—Mr. Short most notably is linking the importance of university admissions to their behaviour in his class.

He offers them an opportunity to avoid the consequences of plagiarism and thus avoid lowering their grade. Mr. Short is colluding with his students in a very obvious way, offering them the chance to avoid discipline for an issue of academic integrity—behaviour that would certainly

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26 In my second year of observations, and as a response to the often chaotic classes Mr. Short endured in the first year of my observations, the school offered the course in three smaller sections.
result in discipline in the higher education settings to which they aspire. While I can only speculate, it seems reasonable to assume that Mr. Short would react differently if he, not the supply teacher, had been witness to the cheating. Instead, he uses this as a kind of teachable moment and reminds the students that he takes cheating seriously but, in effect, he takes their successes in the transition to higher education more seriously.

Overall, these instances of collaboration between student and teacher point to students enjoying a certain level of control in the classroom and savvy in their interactions with teachers—a knowledge about how to maximize the benefits of their relationship with their teacher. Students’ ability to influence or dictate how teachers teach and evaluate ultimately results in benefits for the students much like Lareau (2003) predicts, most importantly in terms of their grade. The willingness to try their hand at controlling the classroom suggests a kind of entitlement to influence their educational experience. In turn, successfully influencing their classroom reinforces entitlement and encourages the confidence and ease these students show in their interactions with teachers. These are skills they are acquiring alongside knowledge of academic subject matter. In effect, these processes are contributing to the education of the whole child, although perhaps not in the way defined by administrators. Teachers’ willingness to collaborate with their students and, notably, initiate many of these collaborations demonstrates a positive student-teacher relationship. Furthermore, these examples show that these practices are somewhat commonplace and normalized in the everyday practices at Boy High and Girl High. If we situate these findings within the whole child framework these schools operate within, we can see the alignment between the school and the effect of concerted cultivation—the entitlement to individual preferences the students bring with them to the school setting.
Teachers do not just sympathize with these students’ requests and respond accordingly. Oftentimes, the teachers appear to do their own calculations of what would benefit their students. Returning to an earlier example, it was Mr. Short that initiated and guided a 20-minute discussion on how and when his students could be tested on calculus and vectors. Again in an earlier example, Mr. Brown suggested that students can be strategic about scheduling their ISP presentation date and went a step further in offering to calculate their grades on a case-by-case basis to maximize their university submission grade. This ultimately creates more work for the teachers.

Teachers’ role in creating these opportunities seems to ignore ability. There are students who discuss receiving marks that are objectively poor marks, not just relative to the seemingly high expectations of Boy High and Girl High students. The following field note captures both the high expectations and my own question about what happens to students who achieve far less than what is expected:

There have been a number of students who have lamented their grades as poor or barely satisfactory, and they’re talking high B-range grades or low A-range grades. Surely these are good marks to most high school students, but this is a climate where the expectation is that you’ll be getting solid A-range marks. The funny thing is that some students talk about quizzes that they did poorly on (‘I got a 40’), but do they all end up doing well in the end? Who fails? What happens then?

And yet, in the end, even students that struggle academically do not fail their classes. In my time at Boy High and Girl High, I never heard of a student failing a class. A couple of students quipped: “That doesn’t happen here” (field notes). Some students remarked to me that “victory laps” (making up credits or improving one’s grade in a course by taking an additional year of school) are not allowed. Administrators and teachers confirmed this in my discussions with
them, noting instead a process of vetting who is allowed to take advanced-level courses, rather than letting just anyone take any course and risk receiving a bad mark.\(^{27}\)

Why would teachers show a willingness to initiate their own means-to-end calculations on behalf of their students, even when it might mean more work for them? Asking why such strong trends of collaborations exist at Boy High and Girl High is a valid question, in part because there are no guidelines in the provincial curriculum—on which these schools base their own curriculum—stating that these practices are standard or to be expected by students from teachers. Furthermore, neither Boy High nor Girl High advertises these practices, nor are there, to my knowledge, any formal guidelines given to teachers in either setting about how marks are calculated, etc. It may have something to do with satisfying their market and boosting their school profile via successful university admissions (a goal that should not be underestimated in elite private school settings); presumably students (and their families) are happiest when their opportunities for success are maximized, and whether that opportunity is student- or teacher-initiated is beside the point.

I would suggest that what is most crucial is the educational context: Boy High and Girl High share an overall goal of educating the whole child. If a school intends to nurture leadership, teachers should respond to a student showing initiative within the classroom because doing so nurtures the kinds of personality traits the schools hope to see in their alumni. Allowing students to seek these accommodations provides students with a certain amount of control over their education. Much like the findings of Anyon’s (1980, 1981) earlier work, the students in these privileged educational settings at time appear to be in charge of the classroom. A high

\(^{27}\) Although I don’t have this information for Boy High, the practice at Girl High was to require a letter of permission from parents to enrol a child in a course that the school had tried to prevent (through counselling) the student from taking, due to questions about her ability to keep up with the workload based on her work in prerequisite courses.
degree of negotiation is present, much of this initiated by students. According to the economic structure argument articulated by Bowles and Gintis in *Schooling in Capitalist America*, these classroom patterns relate to what the students can anticipate doing in the labour market. Through the lens of Boy High and Girl High, it is possible to see how some of these processes actually take shape. Just as important, however, is the finding that students are actively shaping these processes.

**IS SAVVY GENDERED?**

Researching an all-girls’ and an all-boys’ school provides an opportunity to compare the practices within each setting. Does the student/teacher relationship look different in these differently gender-segregated contexts? Given that Boy High and Girl High students bring with them the same background of concerted cultivation, one might expect to see similar levels of entitlement. But peeling back the layers of these elite settings and looking deeper into the student/teacher relationship creates the opportunity to see gender differences in this potential source of advantage. I find that there are differences in both the frequency and tenor of negotiations at Girl High and Boy High.

It is worth stating at the outset is a reminder of the difference in days and hours spent observing in each research setting. More time was spent at Boy High than at Girl High because of differences in access offered by each school, which affected both the start and end dates and the number of days per week permitted in the field.²⁸ As a result, the differences discussed in this section of the chapter could be an artefact of the data. That said, the patterns that emerge from the data suggest that there are differences worthy of discussion, and possibly worthy of

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²⁸ I visited Boy High on 60 different days for a total of approximately 205 hours. I visited Girl High on 34 different days for a total of approximately 114 hours. In both schools I visited classrooms in math, science, social science, and the humanities.
further investigation. In particular, the data suggest that teachers respond differently to the students’ attempts to capitalize on their teacher-student relationship and/or that Girl High teachers take less initiative in creating opportunities for savvy to take hold. This also suggests a contradiction between the literature published by Girl High—emphasizing a collaborative community—and the actual practices within the classroom (see Chapter 2).

When the students in the classes I observed at Girl High try their hand at requesting or expecting collaboration—such as by suggesting different ways that class time could be spent or the way they were to be tested on material—the approach is different than it is among the students at Boy High and the girls’ requests do not seem to be as readily taken up by their teachers. Of the observations that were coded as instances of collaboration, my field notes for approximately one-quarter of those observations include mention of the girls complaining to the teacher. For example:

At the end of class, when Mr. Richards assigns homework, the girls complain about having homework over the [Easter] weekend. Joy: ‘I have to go to church all weekend! Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday! All weekend!’ Mr. Richards: ‘So do I!’ They are all pleading, saying [Mr. Richards’] name as part of their pleas in a whiny kind of way, but Mr. Richards doesn’t budge. He seems to find it amusing or enjoyable though; he has a smile.

As in this example, the complaining was most apparent in cases of students initiating collaboration. In contrast, only once did I note that a student at Boy High complained to a teacher (in the context of collaboration over an assignment due date). Where I noted the tone among students at Boy High, it tends to be calmer, more directive, and firm. For example, my notes include instances of test formats and dates being “casually debated”; one student “is stewing a bit” about a proposed test date, but this is notable through his body language alone, and he otherwise keeps this to himself; in another example, a few Boy High students “express concern” about how they will be evaluated in a class debate if there isn’t enough time or
opportunity to make their case, and they suggest the teacher collect their debate notes to be evaluated properly. Generally speaking, the students at Boy High approached the collaboration with more confidence and directness than did students at Girl High.

The assumption contained in school documents is that teachers are willing to and interested in collaborating with students on their education (see Chapter 2). And yet teachers at Girl High were overall somewhat less likely to respond positively to students’ attempts at collaborating over how class time was spent, how they would be evaluated, and the dates on which evaluations would take place. I also saw very little overt adjustment to students’ grades at Girl High. But while the teachers at Girl High may have been less likely to respond positively to student initiatives, they did express more care and concern over the stress that students might be feeling. While they were not necessarily more likely to adjust an assignment due date, for example, they were more likely to try to gauge students’ stress levels and react on that basis. The teachers were far more paternalistic in their attitude towards students. When I first met Ms. Green, she told me:

So it’s micro [economics] until January, then a mock exam and I count this mark as their test, and then macro [economics] until May, and then the last two weeks they do a poster just for their summative. After a whole year of stress they shouldn’t have to do a whole other paper or presentation, so a poster is good. They’re just exhausted.

This decision ultimately benefits the students in much the same way as adjusting evaluations on the basis of a student-initiated collaboration might. The avenue to that benefit is the key difference. At Girl High, where empowerment is the name of the game (see Chapter 5), the paternalism of teachers is far less empowering than what the students at Boy High experience. Some of the teachers at Girl High seemed to believe they needed to take care of the well-being of their students.
Consistent with the same-gender hiring pattern at Girl High and Boy High, all but one of the teachers of the classes I observed at Girl High was female. It is possible that this kind of nurturing approach to their students is an example of these teachers doing gender (West and Zimmerman 1987). However, not all female teachers at Girl High reacted similarly to students. Furthermore, the female teachers (in the minority, following similar hiring practices) at Boy High did not act in a similarly nurturing way to their female counterparts at Girl High. This suggests that the school context is important, and that the patterns that emerge around teachers, collaboration, and nurturing are not due to the gender of the teachers observed but may be a product of the institutional environment. One such indication of this is a week-long event held midway through the school year at Girl High that focused on stress and well-being. Each day of that week, students were permitted to select an activity meant to help cope with stress, encourage relaxation, and learn about how to manage the tensions they were experiencing with the end of the school year drawing near. Some of these activities included yoga, meditation, and cooking classes. Boy High’s calendar did not include a week of this nature, or anything similar, even though Boy High students also exhibited stress at the same important points throughout the school year.

Girls are simultaneously not exhibiting a great deal of educational savvy nor are they encouraged through positive reinforcement to try their hand at this kind of collaboration in the same way that boys at Boy High are encouraged. Nor are teachers colluding. This is somewhat surprising, given the emphasis on collaboration in Girl High school documents. The logic of the institution may support entitlement and encourage collaboration between teachers and students, but this does not always happen in practice to the same extent that it does in Boy High. These are also surprising in light of larger school goals around creating future leaders and, particularly
at Girl High, instilling confidence and “girl power” in their graduates (see next chapter). Surely encouraging students to try their hand at negotiating over their education and educational outcomes, and having success in these endeavours, would instil confidence?

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown how the teacher/student relationship can be a source of advantage for students. Bolstered by a sense of entitlement (Lareau 2003), students show savvy in their interactions with teachers and use these relationships to their benefit. Previous research on elite private schools speaks to a collegial kind of relationship between teachers and students but has not articulated the specific ways that relationship might translate into advantage for students (see for example Khan 2011 and Cookson and Persell 1985). I have demonstrated that students can capitalize on their relationship with teachers to seek educational accommodations. Relations with teachers are not just friendly but also a source of advantage. Where the private school students discussed in Howard’s (2008) research believed good grades were the result of ‘toeing the line’, the students at Boy High and Girl High are more active agents in shaping their educational experiences and outcomes. And, unlike the children in Calarco’s (2011a, 2011b) study who were seeking accommodations over relatively minor things (like additional help from their teacher during class), the students of Boy High and Girl High draw on these relationships to do things like boost their grades. This can have significant implications for their post-secondary plans.

This work happens alongside their everyday academic work and pays dividends in customizing their educational environment and boosting their grades. At a time when students are competing for a place in their preferred university—a process that can get quite competitive
given their program and institutional preferences (see Chapter 6)—these benefits are a crucial source of advantage. This seems possible only in a smaller setting, with motivated students and teachers, all in a context bent on keeping their market happy, educating the whole child, and seeing their students succeed. Boy High and Girl High intend to nurture leadership in their students. Allowing students to show initiative by seeking accommodations in the classroom provides students with some control over their education much like we might expect using the correspondence principle framework (Bowles and Gintis 1976; Anyon 1980, 1981). These classroom patterns relate to what the students can anticipate doing in the labour market.

A notable difference in frequency and tenor of savvy and negotiation at Girl High and Boy High raises questions about gender differences in entitlement (or at least actualizing the entitlement) as well as institutional support for educational savvy. While Girl High boasts of their graduates’ confidence and leadership skills and officially espouses (in their documentation) the importance of the teacher/student relationship and especially collaboration, that vision may not translate well into the everyday practices at Girl High.

Is it possible that these kinds of accommodation-seeking behaviours are actually fairly typical in the classroom? Powell, Farrar, and Cohen (1985) argue that these accommodations—what they call “treaties”—are commonplace. They argue this is the result of high schools that are akin to a shopping mall, where the goal is to draw in as many students (consumers) as possible and retain them by offering something for everyone through course offerings, different tracks, extra-curricular activities, and accommodating students if it will keep them at school. Treaties are the tacit arrangements made between students and teachers, such as an informal agreement that students will behave if the teachers do not push too hard (Powell et al. 1985). It is also possible that these advantageous teacher-student relations are a product of the private
school classrooms, which tend to be smaller than average high school classrooms and therefore offer a greater sense of intimacy. Private schools endeavour to create a small, tight-knit community, and these negotiations could be a product of that closeness. Proweller (1998) found a close-knit community and positive relations between students and teachers to be the result of the size and single-gender characteristics in her work on a single-gender private school. These alternative explanations, however, ignore two important dimensions of Girl High and Boy High: the whole child philosophy and the university prep orientation first discussed in Chapter 2. Indeed, the treaties (Powell et al. 1985) in these settings are quite different than those found in your average ‘shopping mall’ high school. A different treaty is apparent at Girl High and Boy High, one marked by collusion between teachers and students and a high degree of student entitlement, confidence, savvy, and engagement. The issue is not students staying in school but rather the kinds of grades the students earn, how their teachers convey material to students in the classroom and, ultimately, their successes in university admission. Furthermore, Powell et al (1985) largely centre these conclusions on students that seem disengaged, with treaties meant to keep them in school for as long as possible. In comparison, the students of Girl High and Boy High seem extraordinarily engaged with what happens in the classroom, even if only because they are focused on securing a spot in their preferred university. Treaties may not just exist between students and teachers who are working hard to keep students in the classroom, and would appear to vary considerably depending on the particular school context.

Had I formally interviewed teachers as part of my data collection, I could have gained the teachers’ perspective. At its most basic, the teachers could reflect on the nature of their relationship with students. Beyond this, I would have inquired about how much of the teacher-student relationship that in my eyes seems advantageous for students is intentional. To what
extent do the teachers believe the whole child school philosophy enters into their classroom and interactions with students? Do they see these negotiations and collaborations in the same way as I interpret them? Would they agree that students are advantaged by these relationships?

In the next chapter, I explore the school environments with gender in mind, paying particular attention to how administrators conceptualize their students as gendered beings and how this works its way in to the everyday practices at Boy High and Girl High.
Chapter 5

REINFORCING AND CHALLENGING GENDER DIFFERENCE

Because boys are not around as part of the daily school routine to remind girls of the ways in which patriarchy has historically and continues to organize gender relations between boys and girls at home and at school, their place of work, gender paradoxically pales as a key structural dimension of life in the all-girls’ school. (Proweller 1998)

Although it seems self-evident, it is worth stating that single-gender schools are based on the notion of gender difference. Boys’ schools are the experts on educating boys in a way that is boy-centric, ensuring that its students are engaged with the material, have their educational needs met, and find success as they move through school and beyond. Girls’ schools are the same. Both have mandates to meet the unique needs of boys and girls. Where boys are concerned, this has been unproblematic; boys’ schools have historically prepared boys for positions of leadership and labour market participation. For girls’ schools, however, there have been significant changes in the role of women and larger societal goals around gender inequality largely via changes to women’s role in the home and workplace. These schools have gone from “finishing” to “empowering” (DeBare 2004). This chapter looks at one particular moment in the continuing history of single-gender schools. I pay attention to the ways that administrators conceptualize their students’ strengths and needs and the way these understandings are embedded in the everyday practices of the schools. For Girl High I also show the contradiction between girl power, stereotypes, and class privilege at an elite girls’ school. I begin by first outlining some of the relevant sociological literature on single-gender schooling, particularly as it relates to gender inequality.

THE ZERO SUM GAME OF GENDER EQUALITY
During the 1990’s, a vast amount of research examined the experiences of boys and girls in elementary and secondary education. For example, Myra and David Sadker (1994) documented a wide variety of ways in which classroom practice and the interactions between teacher and student are dramatically gendered. They highlighted boys receiving greater attention overall, boys receiving more precise feedback on their work, girls’ behaviour and appearance recognized more than their academic effort or ability, and the short-circuiting of girls, which refers to the tendency for teachers to do for girls but show how to do for boys (see also Orenstein 1994; Sadker, Sadker, and Zittleman 2009). Using the Sadker’s’ research, among many other sources, the American Association of University Women argued in a report that the educational system was not meeting girls’ needs, the result of which was girls emerging from the education system with less confidence and self-esteem (AAUW 1992). Although their report did not call for single-gender education as a solution to these deficits, and even cautioned in a later report against concluding that single-gender schools were the remedy (AAUW 1998, Lee 1998), many others suggested single-gender schooling as a solution to the equity issues in coeducational education. For some, it seemed like a natural solution or at least a potential ray of light amidst widespread concerns over gender inequality in the classroom (Sadker et al. 2009).

Following the onslaught of attention to girls’ education and continuing today, research and public debate began posing the question ‘what about the boys?’ in response to the perceived inattention to boys’ issues within schools. Spurned by higher rates of dropout and learning disabilities among boys (Kleinfeld 2009), girls’ higher grades (Buchman, DiPrete, and McDaniel 2008), women outpacing men in university attendance, and the apparent feminization of education (Walkerdine 1988), researchers, education leaders, and journalists questioned the focus on girls’ experiences in education (recent examples of these ongoing discussions include
Tyre 2006 and Abraham 2010). Some critics of this “boy turn” (Weaver-Hightower 2003) argue this led to the development of a “boys’ industry” (Mead 2006), paving the way for experts who work to demonstrate that boys have unique educational needs from girls. Several scholars speak and publish on the subject, producing a number of books with mass appeal. Michael Gurian, for example, makes causal connections between brain research and gender differences, such as the idea that girls have stronger neural connectors, leading to better listening skills and understanding of various tones of voice, which equip them to write assignments with greater use of detail (Mead 2006). Scholar Christina Hoff Sommers (2000) includes detailed statistics on gender differences in achievement to set the stage for an argument centred on the efforts to boost girls’ academic performance; among her arguments is that the feminist contribution of gender as a social construct has led many to deny that boys and girls are different biologically and morally. Michael Thompson’s argument is rooted in the idea that schools expect behaviour that is simply more natural among girls: doing homework, sitting still in class, expression through writing and verbal dialogue, and working in groups. Finally, journalist Richard Whitmire (2010) points to increased literacy expectations in the knowledge economy without the educational supports to help increase boys’ literacy, along with the detrimental effects of a “boys will be boys” attitude that boys will eventually develop and catch up.

Weaver-Hightower (2003) examines the “boy turn” in various streams of literature, from theory- to practice-oriented arguments, and finds that most of this literature has holes and is riddled with misguided assumptions and causal connections. This includes discussions of research on the brain and gender differences. The scientific research suggests that gender differences in the brain have been overstated and misinterpreted by proponents of single-gender schooling and unique educational needs for boys and girls more generally. One such critique is
of Gurian’s claim that causal links can be made between differences in boys’ and girls’ neural connectors and the students’ use of detail in writing assignments; other experts argue there is no causal link and that Gurian’s claim makes many leaps to get to its conclusion (Mead 2006). Most experts critical of brain research believe the data is relevant but the conclusions about single-sex education do not necessarily follow (DeBare 2004). In a meta-analysis of research on gender, education, and scientific evidence of the brain, Halpern and colleagues (Halpern et al. 2011) note that the established finding in neuroscience of the lack of brain difference affecting learning between boys and girls is at odds with literature on single-sex schooling that relies on an argument that brain differences between the genders is a fundamental motivator and justification for having separate learning environments. As one pediatric expert stated: “If someone came to me and said, ‘Help us make an argument for single-sex education’, I couldn’t make any arguments based on brain research” (as quoted in DeBare 2004).

For the most part, the concerns about boys and education are overstated. As one education think tank reported about the matter of women’s overrepresentation in earning Bachelor’s degrees: “The real story is not bad news about boys doing worse; it’s good news about girls doing better” (Mead 2006). In absolute terms, boys are doing better in terms of academic achievement and attainment. These gains have simply not been as fast as the gains made by girls (Corbett, Hill, and St. Rose 2008; Mead 2006). Most problematic about the sensationalist attention from the popular press is that it ignores an actual crisis in boys’ education: there are some groups of boys who are suffering academically. Focusing exclusively on gender moves attention away from gaps related to race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Furthermore, there is still the issue of outcomes: men continue to earn more professional degrees, have higher incomes, and women are still heavily concentrated in traditionally female-dominated
fields like education and psychology. In his concluding remarks, Weaver-Hightower (2003) urges researchers to “gauge the true impact of such disadvantages and then, rather than weighing them against a hierarchy of disadvantage, find ways to fix them without hurting people who have other problems” (490).

Implications of the Debate.

While many question the argument that gender equity in schools is a zero-sum game (AAUW 2001, Corbett et al. 2008), the debate about gender parity in education has raised questions about how to meet the needs of girls and boys. Given ongoing gender inequalities in education, single-gender classrooms and schools are frequently proposed as an answer to gender inequality in the classroom, a solution for both girls and boys (see Sadker et al. 2009 for a discussion of these trends in the United States). In keeping with this are the increasingly popular experiments with single-gender classes and schools. Most common are school board experiments with single-gender classes, particularly in specific subject matter (offering girls-only computer science and math courses, for example, or segregating boys and girls for English classes). Locally, the former education director for the Toronto District School Board called for more widespread single-gender classrooms, with the goal of eventually creating single-gender schools, as a solution to the dropout rates and low grades of boys (CBC News 2009). This led to the development of single-gender classrooms as part of a program meant to deal with student disengagement across a few fronts, including gender. Beginning with enrolment for the September 2012 school year, parents could enrol their child into boys’ and girls’ leadership academies that provide a number of single-gender classrooms. Single-gender schools for boys are supposed to be distraction-free environments with attention to learning difficulties and
opportunities for physical exercise. Single-gender schools for girls are supposed to create a ‘safe’ learning environment without the risk of playing down academic ability to ‘fit in’, and offer education tailored to what were seen as the learning styles of girls, such as group work. They also afford the opportunity to nurture girls’ interest in science, technology, engineering, and math subjects (“STEM”), fields in which women have historically been under-represented.

These new single-gender programs have proceeded without solid evidence backing gender segregated education. Research on the outcomes of single-gender education has at best produced mixed results. Where benefits are found, they are mostly rooted in the characteristics of the students attending and/or features of the schools, many of which are private, such as small class sizes (Lee 1998). For example, Lee and Bryk (1986) found positive outcomes for girls attending an all-girls Catholic private school versus a coeducation Catholic private school, including greater interest in math and science and higher educational aspirations (see also Lee and Marks 1990). Other researchers have found no appreciable differences between students attending single-gender or coeducation institutions (AAUW 1998; LePore and Warren 1997). At the same time, criticism has been levelled against much of this ‘outcomes’ research, due to flawed methodology (Thompson 2003). The primary concern is the difficulty in measuring the impact of the school itself and not the kinds of characteristics that students bring with them to the school (such as academic engagement, studying habits, etc). For example, Linda Sax (2009) found small benefits for female private school graduates in areas that historically favour men, such as an orientation to math, computer skills, engineering, and science; however, she hesitates to draw conclusions because results depend on the demographics and characteristics of the population and school.

29 For a thorough discussion of the rationale behind girls’ schools, please see the National Coalition of Girls’ School website (www.ncgs.org).
While research on outcomes has produced mixed results, research on the practices within single-gender schools raises concerns that they may actually reinforce gender and maintain sexist practices (Sax 2009; Lee, Marks, and Byrd 1994; Halpern et al. 2011). In a comparison of the classroom practices at boys’, girls’, and coeducation schools, Lee et al. (1994) found similar frequencies of sexism but also found that the type of sexism varied depending on the school type. Boys’ schools were marked by confrontational teaching styles, explicit sexism (e.g., a poster of a bikini-clad woman in a calculus class), and teachers encouraging sex stereotyping. Girls’ schools were marked by the expectation that girls will need help, talking down to girls, and catering to stereotypical conceptions of females, including the expectation and even encouragement of dependence. Coeducation schools were marked by the kinds of practices found by Sadker and Sadker (1994) discussed earlier, such as boys receiving more classroom attention.

Sexist practices may even exist in schools where gender equity is a deliberate curricular focus. For example, Spencer and colleagues (Spencer, Porsche, and Tolman 2003) conducted research at a coeducational school intent on creating a gender equitable environment through such things as curricula addressing issues of power and social justice, professional development programs focused on gender equity, ongoing discussions about gender equity policies and practices, and a clearly-defined harassment policy. Despite these intentions, the researchers found instances of inequality between boys and girls in the classroom, such as boys receiving additional attention when working individually and in small groups. Students understood these differences to be a result of the fundamental differences between boys and girls, suggesting that deeply-entrenched notions of difference may negate a school’s attempts at gender equity. While Spencer’s research was situated at a coeducational school intent on challenging gender
inequality, it is relevant because many girls’ schools are also intent on challenging gender inequality and nurturing the notion of ‘girl power’. Indeed, female empowerment lies at the heart of what Girl High administrators and teachers believe Girl High does best, as I discuss in this chapter.

What seems particularly important to consider is the institutional context constructed by adults. Given that institutional structures can act as constraints on practice (Connell 1987), the gender regime of a particular institution seems important to include in an analysis of any institutional setting but perhaps most especially a single-gender setting. Girl High and Boy High are institutions molded by the Board members and administrators; the students’ experience of schooling is influenced by the setting created by these key figures. Messner (2000) argues that we must simultaneously be aware of not just the institutional context but the cultural meanings around gender and the interactions among actors in the setting. This chapter seeks to take these multiple levels of analysis into consideration.

In this chapter, I consider how the administrators at these schools understand the students of Boy High and Girl High to be gendered individuals, and how the available research is used to support these understandings. I explore how this research is used to justify the single-gender mandate of these schools, and to what extent these conceptualizations of boys, girls, and their educational needs make use of and perpetuate gender stereotypes. I also consider how administrators balance notions of gender difference that form the core of their mandate and curriculum with larger goals around equality. This is a unique dilemma for single-gender private schools mandated to educate separately. On the one hand, single-gender schools claim to offer superior education for girls or boys because they believe in innate gender differences that produce unique educational needs and therefore require different kinds of schooling. On the
other hand, they educate within a social context that is aware of and concerned with gender equality, and potentially calls into question the suitability of single-gender institutions. I approach this issue by looking at two things: first, what informs and legitimates administrators’ mandate and curriculum? Second, what happens in the everyday practices of the classroom? One of the contributions of this paper is to move beyond teacher practices to the administrative directives that ultimately trickle down to the classroom. Private schools have mandates, and the heads of school stay on top of emerging research and parental praises and concerns, which feed into school practices. I begin by outlining the common sentiments about the single-gender nature of Girl High and Boy High, through the words of the administrators and students. I then delve into how the belief in gender differences is at the heart of Boy High and Girl High.

GIRL POWER, BOY POWER

The philosophy of both schools reflects a strong commitment to the ideal of single-gender education. Boy High’s headmaster, Mr. Milton, often used the expression “boy-centric” to describe what he saw in the classrooms at Boy High. While flipping through a Boy High staff newsletter one day, I came across a paragraph written by Mr. Milton describing how he likes to use his unstructured time to walk around and see what is going on in some of the different grades. He cites a few grades and teachers, and even particular lessons, and says that he saw a lot of “delightful boy-centric learning” happening. We had a similar conversation in the hallway one day as he emerged from an upper-level classroom; he was beaming—a large smile and wide eyes—and excited, telling me with a clap of his hands that he had just seen some amazing “boy-centric stuff” happening in the classroom. His enthusiasm and passion were undeniable.
Administrators at both schools were strong in their conviction of the benefits of single-gender education, as were teachers, and were quick to itemize the benefits when asked. Administrators at both schools believed that a strength of the single-gender school is the comfort that comes with being in a class with same-gender peers, which enables students to take more risks. Students in single-gender classrooms will be less worried about saying the wrong thing or sounding dumb. In the words of Ms. Harris, the Girl High principal, “It’s wonderful to be focused and just relax in your classes and say what you want. That freedom is amazing. And the girls will tell you that.” Indeed, students did tell me that, across both schools. The ability to be yourself was a major strength identified by both sets of students. To students, this strength revolved around not having to worry about your appearance to impress others. For example, when I asked Beth what she liked about single-gender schools, she said: “I think girls are less self conscious about themselves. A lot of people just wake up in the morning. They don’t even brush their hair, they don’t have to think about what they wear. They just go to school. So I think it’s just a more comfortable environment.” While Beth and some of her peers mentioned not having to worry about physical appearance, the Boy High students went beyond appearance to behaviour: that they could goof off, be buddies, and move about their day without having to worry about impressing girls or competing for girls’ attention. Teachers also acknowledged this comfort level as an advantage of gender segregation.

Administrators and teachers at Boy High and Girl High identified other, unique benefits. At Boy High, the benefit is insulation from the features of a coeducational system that are believed to unfairly disadvantage boys, such as rules that limit physical movement in the classroom. Administrators and teachers are guided by their knowledge of the “boy crisis” in education and seemed particularly well-versed in discussions of the under-performance of boys
and the sense that boys will inevitably be seen as ‘less than’ when boys’ achievement is compared to that of girls. An all-boys school can insulate students from comparisons made between boys and girls and therefore protect boys from feeling ‘less than’. An additional benefit, identified most explicitly by headmaster Mr. Milton in reference to the semi-formal, is that boys in a single-gender school must push themselves beyond gender roles:

Not to be stereotypic on a dance, but when there is a dance, someone is going to do decorations. Well, I’m not sure what happened in your high school, but in this high—in my high school and in other high schools I know about, the guys don’t get too much involved in that. Someone else can do that. They don’t have to consider it. They have to consider it here. And by the way, it’s an important job! So the paths to manhood are broader, they’re more diverse. Homosexuality et cetera and macho-ism—all are tolerated in the [Boy High] environment because they’re allowed to take…they are allowed to be what they are going to be.

In Mr. Milton’s eyes, an all-boys environment forced the boy to expand their idea of the boundaries of masculinity. By his estimation, this kind of freedom to “be what they are going to be” is unavailable at a co-ed school.

This viewpoint about the ability of boys’ schools to overcome inequalities in boys’ education and challenge stereotypical gender roles is not supported by the students at Boy High, whose responses to my question about the benefits and drawbacks of single-gender education focused very narrowly on girls and heterosexuality. This was not a pattern I found in the Girl High students’ responses to the same question. Boys’ comments tended to focus on girls as objects of distraction, rooted in heterosexuality, whereas girls’ comments were not excessively focused on boys. Almost all Boy High students I interviewed talked about how their interest in girls could be a major source of distraction. Some of them spoke out of experience, such as Justin who originally attended a co-ed school: “That’s actually why my parents wanted to send me here, because of the girls. Because I was much more interested in the girls than I was in school, so it was a distraction.” Consistent with the stereotypes of teenage boys obsessed with
sex and girls, the students of Boy High seemed consumed with females and heterosexuality. Mike, a ‘slacker’ student with a troubled reputation connected to drugs, focused his critique of the school on limited interaction with girls: Boy High does not mirror what the students will find once they are outside of school. As he said in an interview about transitioning to university: “It’s not like we’re going to be like ‘whoa, boobs!’, but once you get into university or you get a job or something like that, are you going to be like ‘what do I do now?’” Mike believed that separating boys and girls is artificial and also believed that more co-ed interaction could help normalize females for the students at Boy High. In the end, however, Mike concluded that the single-gender schooling would not seriously impede the students’ transition into the real, co-ed world of university. Some students were more neutral on the subject or said that the single gender dynamic did not matter because friendship groups tend to be gender homogenous anyway: “Obviously interacting with females is one thing, but the thing is that there’s really no big change for me. ‘Cause even when you were in co-ed you still hung out with a lot of guys too, and [attending Boy High] is more of just hanging out with your friends on a daily basis and not trying to think about girls” (Jeremy; emphasis mine). Whether the Boy High students were distracted by girls or not, their answers about the benefits and drawbacks of single-gender schools centred exclusively on girls and did not echo the benefits and drawbacks discussed by school administrators.

The students of Girl High were quite enthusiastic about gender-segregated education. They were not quite as singular as the Boy High students in attributing the benefits and drawbacks of single-gender schooling to girls and heterosexuality. The girls did mention boys in their reflections on gender-segregated schooling, such as feeling relieved that they do not have to consume themselves with their physical appearance. Laura, a quiet and bright grade 12 student,
remarked that “it’s easier for girls to integrate into a community where they’re surrounded by members of their gender because they have more in common.” Krista, a prefect, also referred to the closeness of community in her story about an embarrassing moment at a school assembly:

K: It’s kind of an embarrassing story but I actually was in [assembly] giving a little speech and I fainted in front of the entire school.
J: When did that happen?!
K: A few weeks ago. I was sick at the time. I do [theatre]…it’s not like I actually get nervous…but, like, I totally passed out…I feel like, you know, that [Girl High] is really community cause it’s all girls. I don’t think anyone was like judging, everyone’s nice. I got so many emails: ‘are you alright?’, ‘is everything okay?’ So if I imagine that happens at high school, a public high school or co-ed or…oh my goodness, how embarrassing. It was a little embarrassing but you know it was support—that is an advantage.

Others were more neutral on the subject, much like the boys who pointed to the gender homogeneity of friendship groups. Some of the Girl High students pointed out that they interact with boys through some extra-curricular activities and even outside of school settings, within their communities (like church). I also had a small number of students comment on the nature of the ‘characters’ within a classroom setting, noting that—co-ed or single-gender—you will always have your class clown, your keeners, and so on. In other words, the single-gender aspect of Girl High did not have an effect on all aspects of the school. Where it did have an effect, however, was on the sense of community that grew out of shared experience and the reduced pressure to act and present oneself in a way thought to be physically pleasing to male students.

Like at Boy High, Girl High administrators and teachers also focused on the insulating qualities of an all-girls school and the ability for the school to be a “confidence factory” (Ms. Harris). First, administrators and teachers were very aware of women’s underrepresentation in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. They believed that girls’ schools could correct societal pressures to play down their smarts in the interest of heterosexual romance, essentially by taking boys out of the classroom. They also believed that all-girls schools were
uniquely positioned to instill confidence in their students and it is this confidence that produces leadership.

Notably, when asked about the strengths of single-gender education, administrators and teachers often spoke about attributes unrelated to gender but rather related to the school being private. They were enthusiastic about what the environment could offer students and paid particular attention to the small, close-knit nature of the school. The small teacher/student ratios and small class sizes meant that everyone worked together at some point during their time at the school. Given the size, everyone received the kind of attention they desired. They praised the community aspect of the school, and the “brotherhood” and “sisterhood” that developed. Again, these comments were across both schools and not tied to gender but, in the eyes of administrators and teachers, were a part of their discussion of the benefits of single-gender education.

REINFORCING DIFFERENCE

In the sections that follow, I discuss the research results that administrators call on to support their mandate and the features of the curriculum they highlight as most helpful for meeting the needs of girls and boys. Throughout, the rhetoric used by administrators describe the qualities and needs of boys and girls; out of my interviews with the headmaster, principal, and senior school heads and my observations at Boy High and Girl High emerged a clear picture of what makes a “boy” and a “girl.” I also analyze the ways in which these administrator understandings of gender are translated into how students understand their gender-segregated environments and permeate the curriculum. In particular, I find a tension at Girl High between addressing the ‘needs’ of girls in stereotypical ways and the messages of girl power that are woven throughout the school. Girls are encouraged to believe they have unique and wonderful
qualities that distinguish them from boys and deserve to be celebrated. It is a strong message of empowerment and capability. At the same time, however, the approach to engaging girls is not a particularly feminist one; as I will show, the administrators and teachers make use of many female stereotypes in their efforts to reach girls. The schools draw on gender stereotypes but, at Girl High, also tell the students to defy stereotypes in order to overcome obstacles like occupational glass ceilings.

It is important to address my focus on administrators in this chapter, particularly in light of other research on what happens in single-gender classrooms. Research on the practices within single-gender schools tends to focus exclusively on teacher practices and teacher/student interaction, without considering administrative mandates. For example, the conclusions drawn by Lee et al. (1994) are based mainly on classroom observations. They do not analyze the extent to which the school influences the very practices observed in classrooms (whether through parental influence or the administration’s own initiative). On the other hand, school administration can have a powerful impact on any school setting, but perhaps most especially on private school settings. Administrators are the clearinghouses for parental praises, complaints, and demands for change. At the same time, administrators are also mindful of prospective families. Whether dealing with the concerns and wishes of current parents or looking ahead to the needs and desires of prospective parents, the ‘market’ of these private schools seems ever present and influences administrative practices. Spencer’s (Spencer et al. 2003) aforementioned research on administrative efforts to combat gender inequality in coeducation schools is instructive because it underscores the importance of looking at the role of administrators in crafting a particular educational and gender environment. This is particularly relevant in private schools in Ontario where governments have little involvement beyond curriculum and the
schools are largely directed by parents, via a Board of Directors. Of course, teachers bring their own personalities and teaching practices with them to a classroom. However, private school teachers do not have the freedom to close their classroom door and conduct their classroom in whatever way they see fit. At Boy High and Girl High, school administration and peer mentors monitored teachers. It was not uncommon to see an administrator sitting in on a classroom, observing and taking notes. When talking with an administrator sitting in on a calculus class, she said they routinely go around the school to observe classes and offer “support” to the teachers. My conversations with teachers tell me that this is a routine part of their professional development. Although there was a teacher at Boy High who believed the administrator was checking up on teachers on behalf of parents and did not offer as much support to teachers as they claimed or she had expected, most teachers told me that they were used to being observed and believed it improved their teaching. All of this is to say that it is important to contextualize school practices in the organizations in which they take place; administrators are central to the shaping of the school’s approach to education in a way that may be unique to private schools.

Who are Boys and Girls?

Research on single-gender schools and boys’ and girls’ learning acts as a kind of cornerstone to the educational environments crafted for these students. Research focused on single-gender education is frequently cited by school administrators as legitimating what they do at their schools and offering guidelines to enrich their curriculum. Besides the headmaster and principal telling me as much during our interviews, their actions confirm the same. For example, both Girl High and Boy High have appointed administrators to collect and disseminate the relevant single-gender education research to their fellow administrators and staff. At Boy High,
this administrator mentioned Pollock’s *Real Boys* as essential reading for teachers and has this book and many others like it on his bookshelf. Research touting the strengths of single-gender segregation is highlighted in Girl High and Boy High staff newsletters and newsletters to the broader school community. Teachers are encouraged to participate in annual conferences on single-gender education. Boy High hosted an expert in boys’ education for two days; this presenter spoke to administrators privately, gave a presentation to senior school students, and conducted a one-day professional development workshop for teachers and staff. Girl High administrators devote time to researching and even visiting other educational institutions that use programs or curriculum designed specifically to enhance girls’ educational experiences.

How school administrators at both schools discuss the single-gender educational research highlights how they conceptualize “girl” and “boy” students, which is as very different kinds of people with different educational needs as students. In particular, administrators emphasize how boys and girls learn: emotionally, through their relationships with others, and biologically, determined by their unique capabilities. During my time at Boy High, the teachers were asked to participate in a research project about specific teaching tools that work in single-gender classrooms, with results to be disseminated to other boys’ schools. Mr. Cook, the senior school head at Boy High, described a learning continuum with boys and girls on opposite ends of the learning spectrum. Referring to the study, he remarked that “…it’s an attempt to harvest best practices…you know, what particular teaching strategies work effectively, are particularly effective with boys.” Being aware of and participating in research was seen by this administrator as a crucial part of effectively educating boys. Similarly, Ms. Middleton, the senior school head at Girl High, discussed how they have really relied on emerging work in recent years on how
girls specifically learn and as a result have taken seriously the steps required to move their curriculum towards those results.

In talking about best practices particularly effective for one gender, and taking steps to design a curriculum that will help one gender learn, it is quite clear that the administrators at both schools strongly believe that boys and girls learn differently. Interestingly, however, and perhaps unknowingly, they shared a similar viewpoint on relating to others. At Girl High, principal Ms. Harris says “research tells me that in a safe, secure, and happy environment, women do better. And so, if people walk in the door and they say to me ‘what was different about your school for me is this feeling I have that people were really happy and welcoming and comfortable,’ then at the end of the day I say, that’s our distinction.” She also discusses “research on girls really caring that their teachers cared about them.” The idea that girls do better in a caring and comfortable environment is consistent with stereotypical notions of the importance of relationships and emotions to femininity.

Despite being the stereotypical province of femininity, research related to relationships and relationality also played a central role at Boy High. Boy High administrators were keen on how learning is relational. In the words of Mr. Cook: “Over and over again it seems clear from the boys’ stories of their learning that when they feel recognized and understood by the teacher, they learn more effectively.” This research conceptualizes boys as strengthened by the relationships formed between teacher and student; this result was particularly exciting to the administration and teachers at Boy High in that it “might be counterintuitive with boys because they’re not supposed to be so emotional or care so much about relationships.” Mr. Cook acknowledges the stereotypes of boys and girls but strikes them down in favour of the research evidence. The same study was interpreted by Mr. Fry, a Boy High AP economics teacher, as
meaning that “girls just want to get the work done, they don’t care who’s teaching them, what the teacher is like.” In the end, both Boy High and Girl High draw on research that emphasizes relationality. But this research is used to highlight the unique nature of boys (or girls); independent research findings that could be taken as an illustration of the similar personalities and needs of boys and girls are interpreted as unique to each gender. In framing the research this way, administrators can cite empirical evidence that supports their segregated-school mandate.

A subset of the administrations’ interests in how boys and girls learn is a focus on biology, specifically the research on biological differences between boys’ and girls’ brains. Both heads of schools acknowledge that this is an emerging and extremely intriguing research area to those who are involved with single-gender education. Ms. Middleton at Girl High expressed an interest in seeing more research on “gender and the brain”, believing that the relationship between girls’ learning and the brain is “really important” and the next frontier in strengthening the curriculum at Girl High. This interest in the differences between boys’ and girls’ brains and learning styles was common, despite a lack of evidence that these crucial differences actually exist (see Halpern et al 2011). At a Boy High upper school faculty meeting early in my fieldwork, Mr. Cook discussed research “by Leonard Sax with the technology that has really only been available in the last few years that shows different brain activity in boys and girls doing the same activity.” This emerging area of research was spoken about by administrators with excitement. It seemed to be seen as an additional source of legitimacy for single-gender institutions, an additional support for the schools’ single-gender approach.

Cutting across the discussion of how boys and girls learn is the emphasis on the fundamentally different natures of boys and girls: that they each have unique needs related to the physiology of their brains or their emotional need for relationships. That the schools support the
idea that boys and girls are different across a number of dimensions is unsurprising, given that these schools are founded on the very notion that boys and girls are different and therefore have different educational needs. But administrators’ emphasis on difference seems to ignore the reality of the research they claim as evidence. As illustrated through the example of research on how both boys and girls thrive off of close and caring relationships with their teachers, administrators use research to support the notion that boys and girls are different and therefore these schools, as single-gender institutions, are appropriate places to educate one’s children. Doing so also reinforces the notion of a gender binary, with two categories of people who possess unique characteristics. In assuming a gender binary, the administrators of both schools ignore much of the broader existing literature that is more equivocal on single-gender schools and how boys and girls learn, reviewed above, and select only what supports their single-gender mandate. The subtleties of this research—the similar finding for boys and girls regarding relationships, and the lack of consensus in the scientific community about brain differences (Halpern et al 2011)—are glossed over in favour of supporting the purpose of the schools.

This leads to the second part of this chapter, which explores the implications of the assumption of a gender binary. In particular, I analyze how boys and girls are educated through a discussion of what takes place within the walls of Boy High and Girl High. I use various classroom vignettes to do two things: first, I aim to demonstrate how the notion of inherent gender difference—boys and girls as two distinct kinds of people—is apparent in the culture of the school and classroom, reinforcing stereotypes of boys and girls; second, and related to the first goal, I illustrate a tension at Girl High where students are encouraged to defy the very stereotypes that the administrators have drawn on to inspire and create their school environment.
HOW ARE BOYS AND GIRLS EDUCATED?

In keeping with the notion of difference, administrators encourage curriculum and teaching that meet the so-called unique needs of boys and girls. Emphasizing these differences between boys and girls often draws on and reinforces gender stereotypes. In this section, I describe the approach to delivering the curriculum at each of Boy High and Girl High in turn. I discuss the connection between what happens at the administrative level and what happens in the classroom.

*Boy High: Competing with your Brothers*

Administrators were keen to emphasize that the research on the learning styles of boys illustrated some unique needs, and the school served the purpose of teaching boys according to those needs. Mr. Fry, the AP economics teacher, talked about the importance of the boys feeling like they really know their teachers, and are known and understood by their teachers. In the words of Mr. Cook, senior school head:

> It’s important also that—and we talk about this a lot as a community of professional educators—that, to remember, we’re a boys’ school by purpose. It’s not just a school where only one gender just happens to be represented. We’re a boys’ school because research suggests that the genders have some significant differences in the way they learn.

As just mentioned, this research focuses on how boys relate to their teachers, arguing that boys learn better if they are in an environment founded on the basis of relationships between teachers and students.

What does this relational environment look like at Boy High? It becomes quickly apparent that, at Boy High, the relational environment to foster learning consists of what are stereotypical male behaviours: physicality, competitiveness, and sport. These stereotypically
male traits frequently appear in debates around how coeducation is failing boys, particularly the notion that boys thrive off of competition, need to move around the classroom rather than be confined to a desk, and have unique interests around which curriculum and instruction should be based. Mr. Higgins, for example, told his AP biology students involved in lunch-time intramurals: “I know that you guys need a place to run around, so be careful [to avoid injury]. These days, that’s the kind of thing that would get the school into some trouble, and they’d have to shut [intramurals] down.” At Boy High it was not uncommon to see boys roaming the classroom, even in the midst of a teacher-driven lesson. The following field note from Mr. Short’s calculus class at Boy High is typical:

As they get into the material, some students have to borrow pencils from other students, some get up to the sharpener, the Kleenex box is tossed around. They go through the material by [teacher] asking questions and the students volunteer the answers almost immediately. Generally no hands are raised, just calling out the answer. He also will begin sentences and the students essentially fill in the blank. There’s some small chatter, which [teacher] generally ignores as long as students are participating and seem to be taking notes. They are working through some questions, seems almost a review of the material. One student whips his pencil at the student next to him, and then stops when he gets no reaction.

Boy High students had the freedom to move about the classroom, and the freedom to call out answers without raising their hands. Noise was readily tolerated. In fact, a steady din of noise was the norm in Boy High classrooms.

Instead of fostering relationships among students, the classroom environment seemed to breed competition and one-upmanship. Some teachers merely tolerated the competition the students exhibited in the classroom, such as the English teacher who bemoaned the extent of the boys’ competitiveness over writing good poetry. Other teachers introduced competition as a way of motivating the students and facilitating their learning. In Mr. Higgins’ AP biology class at Boy High, for example, from my field notes:
They get put into 3 groups for a group challenge for multiple choice. Each group has to answer the first 5 questions right before they can move on to the next 6, and so on, until they finish the multiple choice questions. Students get really excited about this, are really racing to be the first team done. No prize for this. Definite tension and excitement. When this is done Mr. Higgins notes there are only 12 minutes left, and he thinks that he’d be pushing it if they did more [test] prep, so instead they’ll play biology Pictionary. The Pictionary competition (two teams, biology references) is evidently a favourite. The students are eventually mostly standing, cheering loudly, high-fiving, waiting in silent suspense for the next picture.

Competition within the Boy High classroom created a level of student excitement, tension, and interest.

These elements of physicality and competitiveness are consistent with the overarching dominance of sports at Boy High. As noted in the history of Boy High (Chapter 2), sports have historically been central to boys’ schools’ efforts to develop character among students. Today, sports are still a highly visible dimension of Boy High. Sports announcements were foremost at upper school assemblies; the results of recent competitions were shared, a ‘player of the game’ was named and asked to come to the front for a handshake and sometimes a prize (like a jersey), and students would be urged to attend the next game. The celebrated athlete was often responsible for a game-changing play or a winning goal—highlighted in the assembly announcements—or made a risky play as evidenced through the occasional bump, bruise, and broken bone. The bulletin boards lining the hallways were littered with tryout announcements, team rosters, and game results. In comparison, sports at Girl High were largely relegated to a less central area of the school, including their trophies, announcements, and sports-related facilities. Sports events at Boy High would often disrupt the schedule for the entire upper school and not just the athletes involved, such as the day when upper year students poured onto school buses midday to be transported to a competing school for the sake of cheering on the

30 I am intentionally vague about this aspect of the physical layout of the schools, to ensure confidentiality.
senior rugby team. This event was free for students, required only parental permission, and occupied all of the afternoon. Sports were a frequent topic of conversation between teachers and students, particularly since many of them worked together as coach and athlete on the same teams, and sports metaphors were woven throughout the school. Often teachers were referred to as coaches and classmates as teams. I never heard this kind of language used at Girl High.

The emphasis on sports and competition is not necessarily at odds with the administration’s belief in the importance of relationships or their belief that boys possess inherent gender differences if we put it in the context of the sociological literature on masculinity and sport. Sport is a central dimension of masculine identity. As Messner (1990) puts it: “all boys are, to a greater or lesser extent, judged according to their ability, or lack of ability, in competitive sports” (422). Boys’ popularity in school settings is largely determined by their aptitude for sports (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992). Sports are defined by competition and hierarchy. They allow for closeness and distance simultaneously, and are a vehicle for boys to demonstrate their masculinity through expressions of physicality (Adler et al. 1992). Sports are also regarded as an acceptable venue for relationships to emerge or be focused around (Messner 1990). This raises the possibility that sport is intentionally drawn on to create or support the relational environment at Boy High. However, administrators never articulated athletics as the means through which relationships could develop at Boy High. They did believe that an interest in sports came naturally to boys and provided a way for brotherhood to develop. But the relationships that were deemed so important to boys were discussed as a product that could emerge between a student and teacher in the classroom, unrelated to sports. The predominant sentiment was that these relationships develop out of the fraternity of a boys’ school—a small and intimate environment where students and teachers have the opportunity to connect with one
another. Relationships—in the way that administrators discussed the research findings on the importance of closeness in the school environment—were never explicitly connected to sport by administrators or teachers.

Emphasizing sports, physicality, and competition reinscribes stereotypical notions of boys’ natures and interests, notably at the exclusion of boys interested in the arts or not sports-inclined. The idea that relationships—to use their words, having teachers and students know and understand each other—are important to boys is counter to male stereotypes. In a sense therefore, emphasizing relationships in the Boy High classroom would have been an opportunity to challenge gender stereotypes. Instead, the everyday at Boy High resembles what we might expect based on the stereotypes of boys. The administrative team and others within the Boy High environment are not countering stereotypical masculine relationships, perhaps because sports and physicality seemed to produce a ‘brotherhood’, a certain kind of relationship. Again, one kind of relationship, but not a replication of what the administrators and teachers referred to in their discussions of the research they admired and aimed to learn from.

At the end of the day, the link between boys and relationships is just an idea. The same is true about the belief in boys’ unique brains. These ideas float around Boy High and are often sources of conversation and even professional development opportunities for teachers and administrators. When asked, they are at the core of an administrator’s answer to ‘why an all-boys school?’ But these ideas were not formally instituted in the school. What is in the school—in the classroom, the extra-curricular activities, and the assemblies—is sports. Competition, hierarchy, and individuality are key features, reinforcing stereotypical ideas of masculinity.
In the next section, I turn to Girl High. Girl High administrators, too, think that relationships are important. They think of relationships in broad terms, acknowledging multiple ways that relationships might be important to girls’ learning; relations were thought of in multiple ways: relating to teachers on a personal level, relating to the subject material, and helping and caring for others. At the same time, gender stereotypes of women are drawn on. Ironically, the school prides itself on challenging gender inequality and defying stereotypes.

*Girl High: Working Together on Things Girls Like*

The most effective teaching methods for girls according to the senior school head and the principal of Girl High are those that harness the power of relationships. That might mean relationships with teachers, relating to the community, or even just relating to the course material. Ms. Middleton describes how girls learn math:

> What happened was that the teachers got really frustrated at the math textbooks because they weren’t geared around the best strengths of girls, so they threw them out and they wrote their own. So we’ve got our own textbook for [grades] 7 and 8… it’s really been hands-on applicable activities that get girls working in groups; that get girls working on real-life problems; a lot of math trails where you go out in the community and do math. All those kinds of things are really what get girls interested in math, and just doing the theoretical, abstract, reasoning piece by itself is not as interesting for them.

Ms. Middleton believed that bringing the curriculum to the world outside of the school and having girls work together is the best way to match math learning with girls’ strengths. She believed in the necessity of relating the subject matter to the girls’ lives and to the ‘real world’ in order for it to truly resonate with them. Notably, she describes as uninteresting the “theoretical, abstract, reasoning piece”, all stereotypically masculine traits.

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31 The part of the text naming the textbook has been omitted to protect the confidentiality of Girl High.
The idea that girls want to help, and that tapping into this would facilitate learning, came up repeatedly at Girl High. Helping was most typically conceived of as taking subject material and encouraging students to apply it to the world around them. Ms. Harris, the principal, went as far as to say that the subject matter is almost peripheral to finding a good application of knowledge:

Girls are overrepresented now in biology and medicine, and you know why? I think girls go to that because they like to help people, not because they care about learning biology, and I think that that’s something we’ve learned about sciences in general. The kids will come to physics if they want to get the water to the village in Africa, and so we say to our teachers: design the projects, get the kids involved in the community and real problems that need to be solved and they’ll learn the math and physics to do it.

It is worth noting that, during my time at Girl High, the school did not integrate female role models in science or integrate contributions by women in the curriculum. This is surprising given that they use alumni from medical and scientific fields in their advertising efforts. Given they have STEM role models among their alumni, it would not have been difficult to incorporate alumni into their efforts to nurture an interest in STEM fields among their students. But women’s progress in STEM fields is not attributed to generations of women breaking through barriers. Ms. Harris attributes girls’ representation in biology and medicine not to the earlier generations of women who carved a path, or to greater opportunities in accessing higher education, but to the idea of pandering to girls’ stereotypical interests in helping others—by showing girls how to help others with problems, an interest in STEM is nurtured.

Girl High administrators also emphasized curricular tools that stress what is of interest to girls. Ms. Middleton, the senior school head, offers an example:

In Grade 8, the structures unit in science often has all these examples about bridges. Girls couldn’t care less about bridges. So what’s the application that will make sense to them? They do care about shoes, so why don’t we use some of the same things they like to do – shoes – high heels and all that kind of thing –
what makes a shoe work? So there’s things that you can change that make a difference. (emphasis hers.)

These administrators were very aware of the long-standing trend of women’s under-representation in STEM fields, and speak to the ways they have found success in introducing and nurturing an interest in these subjects. In this example it is through high heels instead of bridges. In another example, a science teacher and “STEM strategic program leader” created a tradeshow of sorts meant to get girls interested in science through the use of cosmetics. That they have a STEM program leader signals the institution’s commitment to bringing more girls into STEM fields. At the tradeshow, girls rotated through different stations of things like lip balms, perfumes, and facial scrubs, learning the connection between chemistry and familiar make-up products. The examples of helping bring water to Africa, learning angles through high heels, and instituting a tradeshow to nurture an interest in STEM reflects how Girl High administrators understand gender and, furthermore, underscores how they see stereotypical notions of girls and their interests. The avenue taken to make girls excited about STEM and engaged in their learning involved helping others and shoes and make-up, very stereotypical ideas of what gets girls excited.

If the research that Girl High administrators touted is correct—that girls thrive off of a caring environment where they can develop a relationship with their teachers—the everyday practices at the school support this vision. At Girl High, relations seemed to be built on sharing personal details. There were times that a teacher would break away from the lesson to talk about something related to his or her personal life, inviting the students to know about the teacher’s non-school life with spouses and children. For example, Ms. Trapp who taught AP biology at Girl High was visibly pregnant and would share stories of her pregnancy with her students. She would also talk about her eldest daughter. Mr. Richards, the calculus teacher at Girl High, would
also share details of his personal life with his students: “Just as Mr. Richards is getting started he remembers that he wanted to show them pictures of his baby because people have been asking. He pulls up about a dozen pictures, and the girls ‘ooooo’ and ‘awwwwww’ and Mr. Richards is beaming.” This level of intimate sharing was entirely absent from Boy High.

Within the classroom, Girl High fosters non-competitive relationships. An example involves pop quizzes that are taken up in class immediately following the quiz. Students quietly evaluated their own quizzes which were then immediately and quietly put into student folders. Students very rarely compared scores. A number of teachers whose classes I observed made use of a ‘thumb gauge’ (thumb up, level, or down depending on how comfortable the student was with the material) to track students’ comprehension of the material. This prevented students from having to raise their hand or feel embarrassed about what they did and did not know. On days when students seemed to be really struggling with the material and seemed shy about saying as much, a teacher would do the thumb gauge with students’ heads down on their desks, so that no one would even see and compare the thumbs. In addition, instead of competition, pitting students against each other, group work was the norm at Girl High. There was next to no group work at Boy High. At Boy High, pop quizzes looked more like a competition; they were likely to end in a public tally of who received what score, often with a prize going to the top earner.

Similarly, Boy High made use of iClicker technology in its science classes, which always turned into a competition for the highest score and a public tally of who scored what. This competition caused excitement and engagement at Boy High. Across the board, individual competition was the norm at Boy High whereas Girl High students were rarely singled out or compared to each other. When Ms. Trapp, the AP Biology teacher, asked the girls if they would
like the school to buy a set of iClickers: “The UNANIMOUS reaction: ‘Nooooooooooo!!!’ The girls say that they would be stressed out by the time factor (some questions they’d want to spend more time on than others)” (field notes). The fast-paced, competitive, timed activity that was enormously popular in the equivalent class at Boy High provoked anxiety at Girl High.

The students at Girl High learned to work together, to support each other rather than see each other as competitors, and were not pushed beyond this comfort level. Given the administrators’ belief that girls need to relate to each other, their teachers, the subject matter, and the world around them (through helping), these non-competitive relationships make sense. Indeed, not doing a public tally and rewarding the top scorer with a prize is probably typical of most school classrooms and is pedagogically most appropriate. The strong difference between these practices and the highly competitive approach at Boy High suggests that the gendered context—and the associated stereotypes—can have a strong influence on the gendered cultures that emerge (Messner 1990; Thorne 1993).

CONTRADICTION AT GIRL HIGH

At Girl High, there is a tension between addressing the ‘needs’ of girls in stereotypical ways and the messages of girl power that are woven throughout the school. This section focuses on that tension. Girl High students are routinely reminded about the strength of girls. In short, they learn about ‘girl power’. The students shared in the enthusiasm for girl power and were very supportive of the single-gender environment. When one Girl High student asked about my research progress and I said that Girl High was fun because it reminded me of my high school experience with my friends, she quickly stated, “And cause girls are better.” This was a common sentiment, typically said in a lighthearted but genuine way. Girl High students are
immersed in an educational setting that deliberately tries to highlight girls’ strengths and empower them. This begins with the school motto: “Achieve Your Dream!” The motto is meant to communicate to current and prospective students and families that girls can achieve anything imaginable. It is plastered on school advertisements, internal documents, alumni communications, staff memos, and sometimes makes its way into administrator speeches to the students. In its advertising medium, the motto is accompanied by images of girls changing the world by breaking through work obstacles, finding cures to diseases, and making change in third-world countries. The message is that girls have the capacity to accomplish these feats if they are immersed in an educational environment that believes in and nurtures those strengths. Laura, a quiet and studious grade 12 student, said the following about the school motto:

I think it means that girls have the freedom to do whatever they want and they should not feel afraid to do something, even if they think they won’t do well in it and therefore they don’t think they have the ability to do it. And it reinforces the image of a confident girl who is ready to take on any challenges but it’s also okay if she makes mistakes along the way.

To Laura, the motto accurately represents what the school does: instill confidence, provide opportunities, and prepare girls to take on new challenges. This parallels principal Ms. Harris, who also believed that the motto really captured what Girl High does (and does differently than other local all-girls’ schools, in her estimation): it expresses the kind of confidence gained by Girl High students between enrolment and graduation.

Empowerment was also evident in some of the classroom discussions between teachers and students right through to the more formal speeches made by teachers and administrators. Gender inequality was not discussed very much in most classes, the exceptions being those classes where group discussion was more typical or where a specific subject unit focused on women’s issues. In classrooms where group discussion was more typical, like English and social  

32 The motto has been re-worded to protect the confidentiality of Girl High.
science classes, there were some teachers who were willing to talk about gender inequality. In Ms. Monaco’s English class, she takes time to discuss sexual assault in their unit on *Streetcar Named Desire*. She also included “feminist” as a perspective for reading and evaluating literature. In a social science class, Ms. MacDonald used the opportunity to discuss the variety of issues facing women around the world throughout the year and especially during their unit on gender inequality around the world. In discussing wage equity issues in North America, Ms. MacDonald says this is changing: “it changed in my generation and it will change with you girls, you will make the change.” In another exercise, Ms. MacDonald asked the students to take as long as necessary to come up with a list of five female heads of state. When the students struggled to come up with more than just one or two, this lead to a discussion of power, politics, and gender. Ms. MacDonald often discussed gender inequality in the context of change, and how women can and should be at the helm of change in any part of the world. In these classes, the students learn to consider gender inequality, think about its relevance to their lives, grow comfortable talking about it, and imagine themselves as part of the solution.

In principal Ms. Harris’ commencement address given to graduating grade 12 students and their families, she too instilled notions of empowerment for girls, as captured in my field notes from graduation day:

She says that they should remember that they live in a world where some girls still have no opportunity. The grads have opportunity and choices because of the old girls, their mothers, and grandmothers, who created choice for them by fighting against the expected. She says that you used to have to choose home. Then you used to have to choose a career. Now you can make ANY choice. You can be a philanthropist, an award-winning photographer, a journalist, the next astronaut, a scientist, a mom raising conscientious kids that will make change in the world. She says that it is not a question of having to make a path for themselves, but choosing which path to take or maybe even taking a way that isn’t a path yet.
Much like earlier principals of Girl High whose speeches reflect the sentiment around gender equality at the time, Ms. Harris’ speech echoes the more fluid, choice-laden rhetoric common to third wave feminism. She is encouraging the graduating class to realize their dreams, much like their school motto suggests. Ms. Harris wants her graduating students to believe that they have any number of choices and should take advantage of them. They can choose whatever they want to do in life because of the women who came before them, who fought for future generations of women to have choice. Her message of overcoming gender inequality is devoid of the structural forces of inequality; her message is individualized. As Kenway and Willis state about this kind of perspective on gender inequality, “it implicitly blames the victim” for failing to acquire the same opportunities that men might have in the occupational structure (1986:12).

Ms. Harris’ speech also reveals the privilege enmeshed with gender. They are not the girls who have no opportunity. These are not students who are constrained financially. For example, they need not base their choice of major in university on what has a strong connection to a future occupation (such as nursing). Instead, they can do whatever they choose to do or imagine possible. They are girls who can be philanthropists or journalists or scientists. Similarly, the girls in Ms. MacDonald’s social science class experience a gendered analysis, but most of that analysis is meant to understand the lives of women “out there” and especially in third-world countries. Yes, through talking about wage gaps Ms. MacDonald signals to the girls that they may yet experience inequality. But most of the course was centred on the students as vehicles for change in the lives of other women in other parts of the world.

The result of girl power on the one hand but class privilege on the other is Girl High students who feel empowered but seem to reject or be unaware of larger, structural dimensions of
gender inequality\textsuperscript{33}. Their empowerment comes from years of receiving messages about the strength of girls and the attitude captured in their school’s motto, which pointedly tells them that they can achieve whatever they dream\textsuperscript{34}. In their world, women do not experience inequality. They anticipate a number of opportunities and being able to realize their goals. Ms. Harris captures some of this tension as she discusses the grade 12 students’ feelings about their school motto:

The older girls [grade 12] are like ‘duh’ of course they can. Mostly I think some of the older girls in the school don’t know what they can’t do because [Girl High] is a bit of an island. They really haven’t faced not being able to do something, so they come back from university and say ‘we get it now’, or after trying to get their first job or whatever, and say ‘we get it now’. It’s interesting.

And what do the students make of girl power and the school’s motto and message? Most of the girls are keen on their school and particularly the camaraderie they believe is only possible in an all-girls environment. Their reaction to the school motto is far more mixed. Although a couple of girls were reflective and supportive of the motto, most of the students had strong, negative reactions to the motto. As Krista, a graduating prefect, said:

I had Ms. Harris [for teacher-student mentor groups] and she loved, you know, “Achieve Your Dream!” but because she’s exhausted that phrase and she’s not really well liked by the students, it just has a kind of bad connotation with it. I think it’s just a joke: everything, you know, if you say something in class, you know, a woman in history did this and there will always be someone with a smirk: “oh yeah, achieve your dream”.

For Krista, the intention of empowerment from administrators was falling on deaf ears; it did not resonate because it was overused. Krista went on to say: “I think it just kind of like, reinforces that image of a leader and girls can achieve their dream….okay we get it now. We started with it in Grade 7, 8, 9 and by Grade 10 and 11, it’s like ‘okay I get it’.” Another student, Rachel,

\textsuperscript{33} For a similar argument about school culture, see Proweller 1998.
\textsuperscript{34} Interestingly, Ms. Harris said that some of their 50 year old alumni were surprised when they first saw a Girl High advertisement with an image of a Girl High student successfully shattering physical obstacles in the workplace. Their surprise was rooted in their ignorance of any workplace obstacles.
identified the link between the motto and the empowerment the school was trying to instil, but it fell flat: “I think the motto is good in terms of how it shows that we’re confident but it kind of makes us sound like feminists. ‘Achieve Your Dream’…what about boys, can they achieve their dream? They make people think that we’re capable of doing the impossible. I just don’t think that’s what [Girl High] should be advertising.” Her use of the word ‘feminists’ is clearly negative. Rachel strongly believed it was almost irresponsible to advertise that Girl High students are capable of doing the seemingly impossible—like the advertising images of students finding a cure for presently incurable diseases.

Both Ms. Harris and a few of the girls also told me of a group of Girl High students on a spring break trip together who made t-shirts for everyone on the trip. These t-shirts had the original Girl High motto printed with a strike-through, and the words “Achieve Your Dream Guy” were written overtop. This was seen as an act of rebellion by Ms. Harris but was mostly laughed at by Girl High students as a clever play on words. Girls similarly laughed when someone had added the words “In the Kitchen” to the “Achieve Your Dream” advertisement in a local bus shelter. This story did not provoke an angry reaction or induce Girl High students to examine gender inequality.

For the most part, Girl High students laughed at the motto and reacted to it negatively. The reasons why could be numerous. The girls expressed dislike of Ms. Harris that may relate to their rejection of the school motto. Combining some dislike of Ms. Harris with a message they hear ad nauseum, the motto may have seemed vacuous at best. Furthermore, it perhaps did not resonate with the realities of their relatively privileged lives. As the Proweller (1998) quote beginning this chapter suggests, gender does not resonate with students as a key dimension of their experience, despite and because of their single-gender environment. I would also add that

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35 Due to confidentiality, I must be vague about the details of these conversations.
gender pales as a key source of inequality in the life of a *privileged* Girl High student, because their experience of gender is filtered through their social class background. In their world, women have the choice to be whatever they want to be and can be a solution for the problems of other, less privileged women; gender inequality is simply one more thing for these future leaders to conquer.

In the end, girls are taught in ways that emphasize stereotypes and are simultaneously encouraged to try non-stereotypical paths, challenge gender inequality, and embrace girl power. The school encourages relationships between students and teachers and relies on group work and collaboration—not competition—to reach girls. They also encourage whatever means necessary to help girls learn, especially in STEM fields that traditionally do not attract women. This may come at the cost of reinforcing gender stereotypes, as is evident in teaching through high heels instead of bridges. These patterns are contradicted by messages of empowerment woven throughout the school, from the principal’s speeches to classroom lessons to the school motto. In this environment, gender roles and expectations are simultaneously challenged and reinforced, beginning with administrative decisions around research and curriculum and trickling down into the everyday practices within the classroom.

**CONCLUSION**

If the goal is to reach students and engage them with the material, single-gender private schools might be doing a good job. The students often seem genuinely excited about their learning. The beauty trade show at Girl High, for example, brought in girls who otherwise may not have been interested in science. One upper-year student said that it was her first time being involved in science outside of the classroom and that it was a good way to see science in the
everyday. She said she now sees science as more than just “men in white lab coats.” Given the lack of women in STEM fields and other gender-related issues in education, coeducation schools might believe that single-gender schools are a viable and preferable way of reaching boys and girls.

Before committing to this alternative form of schooling, questions deserve to be raised about the practices and outcomes of single-gender schools, including as it relates to gender equity. Especially in light of earlier findings that single-gender schools are dominated by sexist practices, my own findings about reinforcing gender difference, and the increasing popularity of single-gender ‘experiments’, one should be attuned to the extent to which single-gender schools reproduce or challenge the gender order that they operate under. I find that single-gender education at Girl High reveals the difficulty and contradiction in basing education on gender difference while simultaneously attempting to challenge it. Single-gender schools might claim to address the so-called unique learning needs of boys and girls but, in doing so, gender is arguably reinforced. This happens first through supporting the notion of distinct and different gender categories and, second, by catering to this notion of difference in designing and enacting a vision for the school, including its curriculum.

In the past, there was no real contradiction between girls’ schools’ mandates and the broader social environment; at most all-girls schools across North America, girls were learning the skills and attributes that would help them excel in their lives once they were married. They would emerge from these schools ready to take on leadership roles in their community, charity, and events related to their husband’s work. Their lives were largely defined by the lives of their spouse and their education geared towards marriageability and maintaining a household once married. A career and family were incompatible. Canada (and other countries where girls’
schools held this mandate) is a very different place now, however. We are living in an era where
gender equality is valued. How does Girl High then justify their mandate of single-gender
education? It is largely through engaging students with the subject matter through whatever
means necessary and praising the unique strengths of girls through messages of girl power. As
they see it, no other school is better equipped to give girls the confidence to “achieve their
dream.” At the same time, though, the methods for engaging students are very limited. The
school may not be instructing tea-pouring as in days of old, but their methods are still rooted in
narrow gender stereotypes. They have the resources to structure their curriculum however they
want, but must also meet the needs of their market, a group of families who believe in the
benefits of gender segregated education. This does not necessarily have to translate into a school
culture rooted in narrow definitions of what makes a boy and what makes a girl, but that is
precisely the outcome at Boy High and Girl High.

As Arnot (1983:85) aptly states: “Paradoxically the [girls’] school is expected to
challenge the reproduction of gender relations even though it itself was set up precisely to
reinforce this.” This brings attention to the role of the institutional context in making gender
something different and oppositional. Messner (2000) argues that gender boundaries become
most salient when boys and girls are put in the same environment, but that the broader context is
also an important factor. Specifically, the formal and informal gender segregation (in his case,
the organization of the soccer league and the existence of teams separated by gender and age)
combined with cultural symbols and the performance of gender come together to make gender
particularly salient. Gender is most certainly at the heart of the formal and informal organization
of Boy High and Girl High, from the gender homogeneity of the teaching staff (more male
teachers at Boy High, more female teachers at Girl High) to the fact that these are single-gender
educational institutions. And yet, the ‘opposite gender’ is not present but gender boundaries are salient; I argue that the ‘opposite gender’ need not be in the same environment for gender to be salient. By virtue of being in a single-gender school, students are defined in terms of their gender—what they are and what they are not. Gender is very salient in these settings and influences much of what happens in the day-to-day at Girl High and Boy High, despite boys or girls not being physically present in these settings. When “girl power” and even, to a certain extent, “boy power” are celebrated within these settings, gender is very salient and a central organizing principle. A firmly entrenched binary seems almost inevitable.

In the face of concerns about whether we are fully engaging boys and girls in their learning, these findings have real implications for how best to reach students in a way that goes beyond catering to stereotypes. Consider one element of difference between these schools: competition. Where competition was generally absent from Girl High, competition is normalized at Boy High. As a result of their educational environment, boys learn how to function in a competitive environment and, conceivably, are in a better position for a competitive world. Girls in a single-gender environment are not learning competition. Given what we know about the wage gap between women and men, which research suggests is in part due to fewer women asking for promotions and raises, these practices should raise some red flags. If girls’ schools are promoted at least in part on the notion of challenging gender inequality and promoting empowerment among their graduates, then we should see more similarities than differences between Boy High and Girl High classrooms.

This raises two additional points, however. First, many feminists believe that the liberal feminist goal of involving girls in subjects that they would not otherwise select or do poorly in, such as math, science, and trades, has the goal of enhancing career opportunities. Girls are
encouraged to fit into the ‘male world’, without critique of current practice or a challenge to the system. One might question the goal of meeting a ‘male standard’. Furthermore, we should be critical of the individual-based explanations of gender inequality devoid of all sense of structure for essentially “blaming the victim” (Kenway and Willis 1986). And, second, the school does not exist in a vacuum and must also contend with gender socialization that happens outside of its walls. These students are gendered subjects, which cannot be ignored; do you meet them where they are, as Boy High and Girl High have done, or challenge the gender stereotypes and traditions?

In the final chapter that follows, I discuss university choice at Girl High and Boy High. More specifically, I discuss the process of constructing distinctions among Canadian university institutions. The Canadian higher education landscape is somewhat unique in that it lacks a strongly defined hierarchy between university institutions. Girl High and Boy High students and their families construct their own hierarchy, and administrators and university counsellors abide by these distinctions. This population also accesses the distinctions readily available in other contexts, namely the U.S. and the U.K.
Chapter 6

CONSTRUCTING DISTINCTIONS IN UNIVERSITY CHOICE

“Last year was a very successful year, and there are a few ways to measure that. We can look at the percentage of students going to university, getting into some big name universities, the high number of those that got into their first choice, and I’m also hearing about our graduates doing well in university, which is also success. I’ve just started to hear that so-and-so has just gotten into medical school, or law school, and they’ve of course already done their Bachelor’s.”

(Mr. Ryan, head of academics at Boy High, to the incoming senior school, grades 9 to 12)

At the opening assembly for the 2008-2009 school year, which brings together new and seasoned grade 9 to 12 Boy High students, Mr. Ryan talks about success. Mr. Ryan is an administrator who looms large over Boy High, in part due to his physical stature but also because of his central role in discipline, monitoring teachers, and planning academics. At Boy High and Girl High, everyone attends a post-secondary institution in the fall following their high school graduation or, for a very small few, after deferring for one year. This is particularly striking when compared to rates for all Ontario high school students, where approximately 30% attend either a college or university immediately following graduation and another 43% attend a post-secondary institution after deferring (The Daily 2008). In this context, attending university is a success but it is not remarkable. Success is perhaps better measured by acceptance into “big name universities” and advanced programs like medical school, according to Mr. Ryan. In a matter of only hours on my first day at Boy High I learned that students held strong preferences regarding programs and universities. The same was true at Girl High, where conversations focused on a relatively small handful of higher education possibilities. In the US, research on elite private high schools comparable to Boy High and Girl High tells us that these students have their sights set on elite universities (McDonough 1997). This is not surprising, especially given

36 A version of this chapter is forthcoming in British Journal of Sociology of Education.
the historically close relationships between elite private schools and elite universities (Karabel 2005; Persell and Cookson 1985a). But, in Canada, the higher education system is relatively flat in comparison. In this context, how do privileged groups make decisions between otherwise similar institutions?

COLLEGE CHOICE AND THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Much of the college choice research has taken place in countries marked by a highly stratified higher education system, primarily the US, UK, and France. Many of these institutions make up a “global superleague” of prestigious institutions known for their strong research reputations and the power of their degree ‘brand’ (Marginson 2008). At the top of the US higher education system are the Ivy League institutions, other elite private 4-year institutions, a small number of flagship public 4-year universities (the “public Ivies”), and a number of prestigious liberal arts colleges. At the bottom are less-selective state institutions and two-year colleges. Higher education in England and France is similarly stratified. England’s higher education system is marked by the prestige of Oxford and Cambridge (“Oxbridge”), followed by University of London institutions; all other universities lack prestige in comparison. Upper-class students are over-represented in the older, more prestigious university sector and under-represented in newer universities and colleges (Wakeling 2005; Zimdars 2010). In France, graduating from the grandes écoles leads to the most favourable and important positions in French society (Brint 2006; Duru-Bellat, Kieffer, and Reimer 2008). Consistent with patterns in the US and England, students with high-SES backgrounds are over-represented in these elite institutions (Duru-Bellat et al. 2008).
In comparison, the Canadian higher education system appears much less hierarchical. There is stratification in Canada between what are called ‘colleges’ and ‘universities’. Colleges are institutions that grant diplomas and certificates, known mostly for vocational or technically-oriented education, while universities are institutions that confer Bachelor’s degrees and may also award graduate and professional degrees. Graduates of trades and community college programs consistently earn less than university graduates (Walters 2004). The likelihood of a Canadian student attending university versus community college increases as family income increases (Frenette 2008).

While these differences exist between Canadian colleges and universities, most evidence points to comparably little stratification among Canadian universities. It is not that there is no hierarchy, but rather the hierarchy is less pronounced than in other contexts. To make this point, it is useful to compare the Canadian and US research on institutional resources, government regulation and funding, admissions, labour market outcomes, and media rankings. Davies and Hammack’s (2005) research comparing the US and Canadian higher education systems led them to conclude that competition over a spot at a prestigious institution within a well-established hierarchy, like you would find in the US, is virtually non-existent in Canada. In terms of governance and funding, almost all Canadian universities are public institutions with very similar, government-regulated tuition levels (for Bachelor’s programs). In Ontario, the provincial government sets tuition levels for each university stream (e.g., Commerce, Arts, etc) and regulates the degree to which universities can increase tuition each year. Similar tuition regulations exist across Canada (Snowdon 2005). In a recent comparison of institutions within the Canadian and US higher education systems, Zarifa (2008) found essentially no change over

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37 While this distinction between colleges and universities in terms of diplomas and degrees is still mostly true, some colleges do grant degrees in a small number of programs.
30 years on measures of institutional resources across Canadian universities, concluding that Canadian institutions are becoming only mildly more unequal (i.e.: mildly more like the US), and only in areas where the government does not regulate (such as income from endowments). There is some preliminary evidence that differences in institutional resources may make some institutions more attractive to wealthier segments of the Toronto population. In a recent examination of university choice among students in the Toronto District School Board, Davies, Maldonado, and Zarifa (2012) find that Canadian universities vary somewhat on the dimensions of income, endowments, expenditures, and media ranking (discussed shortly), and that some groups are more likely to attend those institutions that fare better on each of those dimensions, including students from high socioeconomic status neighbourhoods. Whether these turn into enduring trends is not clear at this point because efforts to quantify a hierarchy in Canadian higher education are a relatively new area of the Canadian sociology of education.

Unlike in other countries, admission to Canadian universities does not require entrance examinations. Where prestigious institutions in the US admit students with high SAT scores, Canadian universities do not require SATs or other standardized admissions tests\(^{38}\). Some Canadian universities are more difficult to get into than others in terms of entering GPA, but by how much is difficult to discern as there is no systematic national data on admissions rates for Canadian institutions. The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) disseminates some data on Ontario universities, including information on the secondary school averages of full-time first year students. Using the University of Toronto St. George campus and Toronto’s York University as examples, data from 2010 shows that approximately 93% of incoming full-time first year Arts students entered with a secondary school average of 80% or more, while only 49% of York’s incoming full-time first year Arts students entered with a secondary school average of

\(^{38}\) The exception is for non-English speakers, for which TOEFL or equivalent is required.
80% or more (CUDO 2012). This suggests Ontario universities may differ on the minimum entering GPA needed for admission. It is also the case that information on student demographics is not publicly available for Ontario universities. Generally speaking, any stratification in relation to admissions or institutional selectivity, if or where it exists, remains invisible.

There is also a lack of systematic data available related to outcomes; to my knowledge, researchers have not investigated whether specific Canadian institutions offer greater labour market returns for Bachelor’s degrees\(^{39}\). Because admissions competition in Canada tends to happen between competitive university programs like engineering and business and not between the universities themselves (Davies and Hammack 2005), it is possible there is a lack of market premiums for credentials from any particular university. (Canadian students apply to specific admissions streams at institutions, not just to the institutions themselves, and can apply to multiple streams at the same time.)

While not to be taken as the sole measure of an institution’s prestige—after all, Harvard would continue to be elite even without rankings—university rankings by newspapers and magazines have become a popular and widely-used metric for institutional hierarchy. Media rankings are less dominant in Canada than in other countries, particularly the United States. National media such as *Maclean’s* magazine and the newspaper *Globe & Mail* offer annual rankings of Canadian institutions according to criteria like library resources and faculty research grants. The rankings are grouped by university type (such as institutions that offer medical and doctoral degrees) and not by tier like you would find in the US, such as in *US News & World Report*. Although a Canadian university may tout their place at the top of an annual list, media

\(^{39}\) Statistics Canada limits the release of data related to universities, and universities are generally unwilling to release such information (Walters, personal communication).
rankings appear to lack the currency found in the US\textsuperscript{40}. Most Canadian research find that media rankings do not play a prominent role in student decision-making (Drewes and Michael 2006; Kong and Veall 2005).

Taken together, this suggests that the Canadian higher education system is very different. An institutional hierarchy is not as clearly apparent and backed up by media rankings like you would find in other countries where there are clearer distinctions between institutions. If statistics on admission rates do not exist, for example, then Canadians are not aware of any patterns. Because the degree of hierarchy is less clear, we know very little about how students make choices in the context of a less hierarchical university system and how the seemingly similar choice of institutions has an effect on university choice; this includes Canada where there is little research on college choice that recognizes its unique context. Research on this process in the US and the UK tells us that students who come from a privileged family background navigate the steep institutional hierarchy in deciding where to apply and attend, which are namely the most well-known and elite institutions (Ball et al 2002; McDonough 1994). This leads to the focus of this chapter. In countries without a steep post-secondary education hierarchy, like Canada, how do privileged groups decide between otherwise similar institutions?

UNIVERSITY CHOICE

The research on factors linked to the choice of institution provides a useful starting point to understand what motivates university choice, and it provides some context for understanding the construction of university distinctions at Girl High and Boy High. To this end, I include a discussion of university choice for all students, noting where the literature pertains specifically to

\textsuperscript{40} The 2012 case of Claremont McKenna College in California falsifying data to boost their ranking is one indicator of the power of US university rankings.
students from wealthier family backgrounds. There are several important dimensions connected to deciding which higher education institutions to consider, apply to, and ultimately attend. Hossler and Gallagher (1987) identify three stages in the university choice process: predisposition, search, and choice. At any of these stages—from developing aspirations to the ultimate selection of a higher education institution—many factors may play a role. Among these factors are geography, cost, family background, friends, high school, and habitus (a class-based ‘sense of one’s place’).

Proximity to home and the cost of attending can be important factors influencing university choice. Research in Canada has identified the importance of location in university choice (Davies and Hammack 2005; Drewes and Michael 2006; Frenette 2005; Page and Cramer 2000). For example, Davies and Hammack (2005) find that most Canadian high school students apply for a spot locally and choose to stay within their home province. In an analysis of applications to universities in Ontario, location was the most common factor in where students chose to apply (Drewes and Michael 2006). Frenette (2005) finds that Canadian students living more than 80 kilometres away from a university are only 58% as likely to attend a university as students living within 40 kilometres of a university. The effect of distance is felt more by students from lower-income families, a finding which connects location to the cost of attending a university. Independent of location, however, cost and scholarship availability also influence university choice (Drewes and Michael 2006; Page and Cramer 2000). There is some British research to suggest that location may operate differently for more privileged students than it does for the average high school student just discussed. Patiniotis and Holdsworth (2005) find that students from wealthier families held the belief that leaving home to attend university is an important step toward adulthood and independence. This suggests that some students may have
the resources and motivation to shoulder the costs associated with living away from home and are thinking less about location as a cost-saver.

Research has also identified family background as an influence on university choice. Families can be sources of information for their children, displaying an important form of cultural capital. McDonough (1994, 1997), for example, finds that the parents of the relatively advantaged children in her study believed that choosing a college is an important investment; they were willing to spend money on admissions management services not provided by the high school, such as SAT consultants, to ensure the best chances for success. These privileged families know how, when, and why they should interact with their child’s high school about the college choice process. Friends can also be an important influence on university choice. Friends with a similar social background tend to share aspirations and make similar choices and can also be important sources of information on the college choice and applications process (McDonough 1997). In some cases, the influence of friends may surpass the influence of family; Brooks (2003) finds that family helps inform youths’ understanding of the higher education market, but it is peers that influence what choices are deemed feasible through the comparisons they make with each other about their relative abilities. Finally, the high school a student attends can be an important influence. McDonough (1997) invokes institutional habitus to suggest the influence of the high school context, which can create and enforce expectations and breed a kind of entitlement to a particular kind of higher education institution (see also Mullen 2010). The expectations embedded within schools make certain higher education choices obvious and others unthinkable, leading to a narrower choice process (Ball et al.2002; see also Oliver and Kettley 2010; Reay, Crozier, and Clayton 2009).
Finally, we also know that habitus is a factor in university choice by shaping what choices the students regard as available to them and to which universities students consider applying. For some students, attending university is not as much a choice as it is an assumption. Advantaged students in particular are likely to take attending for granted, signaling a university-going habitus (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010; Mullen 2010; Reay, David, and Ball 2005). In her study of the various pathways to attending an elite university, Mullen finds that the predilection for attending an Ivy League institution among students of a high-SES background is subtly inculcated by parents and then reinforced through elite high schooling, so that the choice becomes taken-for-granted (Mullen 2010). Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb (2010) use this moment of ‘conscious choice’ (presence or absence) as their measure of habitus. Even after adjusting for variation in socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, nativity, citizenship, and academic preparation, students who always assumed they would attend college are around 6% more likely to apply to a baccalaureate-granting institutional than those who can recall making a conscious decision to attend (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010). For students with a university-going habitus, choice is then not whether to attend but where to attend (Grodsky and Riegle-Crumb 2010).

Understanding University Choice using Bourdieu’s Distinction

Bourdieu’s cultural reproduction approach is a popular theoretical framework for research on higher education choice. Less used is Bourdieu’s work on cultural products and yet it is particularly useful for understanding university choice within a relatively flat higher education system. In particular, Distinction (Bourdieu 1984) analyzes the realms of class and culture, arguing that the hierarchy of class (based on volume and composition of capital) corresponds to a hierarchy of culture. Those who possess the most capital “distinguish
themseves by the distinctions they make” between cultural products (Bourdieu 1984:6). In the final ‘choice’ phase of the university choice process (Hossler and Gallagher 1987), Bourdieu’s work on cultural products is another way to understand university choice, specifically how students choose one institution over many others.

*Distinction* has largely been used to analyze consumption of art, music, and food. Bourdieu’s own analysis in *Distinction* focuses on the dimensions of food, presentation (e.g., clothing and beauty), and culture (e.g., books, sport, and music) (Bourdieu 2008, 1984). However, Bourdieu notes that any preferences allow for the expression of social differences and that all fields offer possibilities for the pursuit of distinction. Just as Johnston and Baumann argue that “cuisine is a cultural realm where individuals can effectively engage in status displays” (2007:168), the field of higher education also offers the opportunity to engage in status displays. The interest in and taste for particular cultural products is based on a market that valorizes that cultural product (Bourdieu 1984); given the stakes of higher education, where the institutional name of one’s credentials is linked to career and income (Zhang 2005), it is logical to extend the analysis of cultural products to credentials.

Exercising or expressing one’s taste is an opportunity to assert one’s position, one’s ‘rank’ (Bourdieu 1984). Preferences or tastes ultimately influence the credentials acquired by an individual (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Cultural products go beyond technical functions; objects carry meaning, making every act of consumption of a cultural product a marker of class. How do people select among possible educational institutions or know what institutions are appropriate for consumption based on their class position? Bourdieu refers to ‘taste’ as the matchmaker between things and people, the “manifested preferences” (1984:56) of habitus. Thus, Bourdieu’s notion of taste can help explain how students who have a university-going
habitus ultimately make decisions about where to go. This aspect of Bourdieu’s theorizing—that taste is the manifestation of habitus—makes his work particularly useful for analyzing the relationship between privilege and university choice. All students have institutional preferences. But the idea that taste is the manifestation of habitus allows us to differentiate between preferences and class-based distinctions among cultural products and explore how elite groups exhibit their habitus via university choice. Furthermore, the Canadian post-secondary setting, with its subtle hierarchies between university institutions, provides the opportunity to see how social class shapes the construction of a set of distinctions between cultural products that otherwise very similar.

Other researchers using Bourdieu’s *Distinction* for the insights it brings to university choice have situated their work within highly stratified societies, where judgements on institutions are likely clearer because of the well-defined prestige of institutions. Ball et al (2002), for example, note that students and their families make distinctions among particular universities to match their social class to an ‘appropriate’ institution arrayed along the hierarchy. They argue that the perceptions and distinctions of higher education institutions used and made by students and families contributes to the reproduction of the divisions and hierarchies of the British higher education system. In Canada, where there are no similarly obvious institutional rankings, what classificatory judgements are dominant, and on what are these choices based? Using insights from Bourdieu’s work on taste and distinction, I argue that privileged groups in a setting marked by low institutional stratification transmit privilege by constructing their own
hierarchy among the non-stratified institutions and by accessing highly stratified higher education systems in other countries.  

GIRL HIGH AND BOY HIGH

Looking at a more privileged segment of the population—those enrolled in private secondary schooling—makes it possible to focus on the context. This population faces fewer constraints to pursuing higher education and conceivably have all of the options available to them. Girl High and Boy High call themselves “university prep” institutions; one hundred percent of their graduates go on to university and both Boy High and Girl High advertise this information within and beyond school walls. And, although these schools vary in small ways by gender as I will show, they share a remarkably similar approach to university preparation and choice.

Boy High and Girl High share a number of similarities, including their explicit focus on university admissions and their approach to university counselling. The schools begin to introduce the topic of university admissions in grade nine. Administrators, teachers, and especially university counsellors do so by speaking at a very general level about university applications, to nurture a sort of strategic orientation toward their school experience. Instead of sports, clubs, and their community outreach programs being activities to simply be involved in, they encourage students to think of these things purposefully, as avenues for crafting a well-rounded high school experience. They explicitly tie this to higher education, in case there was any confusion; for example, at the university information evening for grade 11 and 12 students at Boy High, the assistant university counsellor had the following to say to the audience:

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41 As Brooks and Waters (2009) have found, seeking admission to international higher education institutions may also be common among students in countries with hierarchical systems. These institutions become an alternative when students do not receive admission to elite institutions in their home country.
It is important to have a repertoire of stories, because you have to represent yourself on paper or in an interview if you’re lucky. I’ve clued you into this beginning with our [university workshops] in grade 10 and 11, and I’ve mentioned in the past the kinds of questions you’ll see on these admissions applications. The universities will be looking for specific statements on leadership and experience. What makes you unique? What are your experiences? What does leadership mean to you? It is our [university counsellors] role to help pull that out, pull the stories out, so that you can write the best application.

Rather than think of these activities simply as experiences worth having during high school, students learn to think of these activities as application boosters, the items that ultimately end up on the university applications. Students understand this, and would sometimes make quips about their level of school participation as a ploy related to university admission.

By the time students get into grade 10, they are participating in workshops and mentor group meetings meant to encourage students to begin to think about their university preferences, what they imagine their university experience will be like, where they might like to attend, if they expect their parents to finance it, and so on. In grade 11, students attend the first of two university information evenings (along with parents and grade 12 students who are attending for the second time). Attending university information evenings in grade 11 is strongly encouraged for those students who intend on applying to a US university, as applications to US institutions are known to be time-consuming. These evenings happen well in advance of application deadlines. Students are reminded of the importance of a well-rounded education, this time tied explicitly to their applications via the personal statements many will have to write. In grade 12 (and sooner, if the student or parents desire), each student meets with a university counsellor to discuss their options and narrow their choices. Finally, a student in any grade (and his or her parent if desired) may attend any of the visits made by university admissions officers. I turn now to a discussion of how a taken-for-granted hierarchy is constructed out of the relatively non-hierarchical Canadian university system.
NARROWING THE FIELD: CHOOSING FROM AMONG CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

In a hallway at Boy High is a world map with push pins. Those pins mark the university destinations of recent alumni, with clusters predominantly in Canada, the US, and the UK. Before class one day, a small group of grade 9 or 10 boys gathered around the map, supplying commentary on the push pin locations. Most of this commentary centered on locations considered obscure. What they note are the anomalies: those grads whose pins are located in the western and eastern provinces of Canada, for example, or the international push pins that are not stuck in Europe (like the one stuck in Africa, to which the boys quizzically and seemingly sarcastically ask why you would go to university there). No such map exists at Girl High, but the same sense of acceptable and obscure universities certainly does.

In spite of Canada lacking a well-defined hierarchy between universities, and presumably because of this, students (and their families) at Boy High and Girl High construct their own hierarchy out of a set of very similar institutions, discerning distinctions between institutions where they are not clearly defined. These distinctions are central to the university choice process at Boy High and Girl High. The Boy High and Girl High populations narrow the field from all possible Canadian institutions to a select few. Among the students, teachers, and university counsellors at Girl High and Boy High, some Canadian universities are talked about almost exclusively while most are not talked about at all. Not only do students note that they “always knew” they would attend university—demonstrating a university-going habitus—the students also knew that they would only ever consider a small number of universities. Consistent with others’ research, the students’ habitus is illustrated through the taken-for-granted knowledge that
they would attend university and attend a certain kind of university. For example, Kevin, a student at Boy High, says in an interview:

I: Do you think there’s a downside to this school?
K: Ummmm... [pause] I think a lot of people here, they have preconceived notions of what you’re supposed to be doing in life. I mean, like, everyone here knew that they were going to university. Well, it’s a prep school, so they knew that they were going to university, say, from the time they were five.
I: Oh really?
K: Well, yeah. And, I feel like if you go to Dalhousie [University], from here, it’s not looked at, like, a good school to get into, but they don’t [understand] that most people don’t end up going to university and if you’re going to any university, you are a success.

Similarly, Krista at Girl High says “I think with my parents it’s never been a question; it’s been ‘you’re going to university’” when asked when she knew she wanted to go to university. Kevin and Krista both identify the family assumption that their children will attend university, illustrating how taste can be second nature when it has been ingrained since the early years of childhood (Bourdieu 1984). Kevin and Krista cannot recall a time when they did not think they would attend university or a time when they made a conscious decision to attend. Kevin also alludes to a hierarchy imposed upon university choice in mentioning that Dalhousie University (in eastern Canada) may not be seen as a “good school”. This too seems taken for granted. Three Canadian universities—Queen’s University, University of Western Ontario (“Western”), and McGill University42—occupy the most time in conversations about university. These universities were frequently referred to as the “major ones,” the actual names of these preferred institutions taken-for-granted knowledge at Girl High and Boy High, as in, “I’m applying to all of the major ones.” (field note).

42 Queen’s is located in the small community of Kingston, Ontario, three hours east of Toronto. Western is located in the city of London, Ontario, two hours southwest of Toronto. McGill is located in Montréal, Québec. Enrolment ranges from 24,000 to over 37,000.
That the ‘major ones’ number only three is noteworthy because there are more than 20 universities in the province of Ontario alone. As mentioned, most high school students apply for a spot locally, choosing to stay within the province in which they live (Davies and Hammack 2005). However, recent cohorts from Boy High and Girl High contradict this pattern and provide an interesting comparison. Table 2 compares university attendance for the 2003-04 graduates of publicly funded Toronto District School Board confirming attendance at a university to graduates of Boy High and Girl High (Brown 2009a, 2009b). Among the public school cohort, 65% plan to attend one of the four universities located in Toronto. In comparison, on average, 10% of Boy High and 15% of Girl High graduates plan to attend a Toronto university. Among Boy High and Girl High graduates, University of Toronto captures the vast majority of students attending a Toronto-area university. Interest in a Toronto-area university is slightly higher among Girl High graduates, which I return to in the next section. It is clear that the cohorts of private school students contradict the pattern of applying locally, identified by Davies and Hammack (2005; see also Davies et al.2012).

| Table 2. Percentage of students attending Canadian and International universities. |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 2003-04                         | Average*                        |
|                                 | TDSBd                          | Boy High | Girl Higha     | Boy High | Girl High     |
| Queen’s                         | 5                              | 28       | 17             | 25       | 13             |
| Western                         | 5                              | 25       | 6              | 21       | 10             |
| Toronto-areab                  | 65                             | 6        | 22c            | 10       | 16             |
| Other Ontario                   | 26                             | 12       | 13             | 16       | 12             |
| Out of                           |                                |          |                |          |                |
| Province/International          | 2                              | 29       | 42             | 29       | 49             |
| N                               | (6,655)                        | (87)     | (106)          | (83)     | (112)          |


a Data reported is for 2004-05, the first year data is available for Girl High.

b Includes University of Toronto, Ryerson University, York University, and Ontario College of Art and Design.

c This number includes an anomalously high attendance at the University of Toronto.

d This set of data does not include information for students attending a university outside of Ontario. Out-of-province, including international, post-secondary attendance is estimated by the TDSB to be approximately 2-3% of an average post-secondary-bound TDSB cohort (Brown 2009a). Because this is a separate measure, the TDSB column does not add to 100.
The table also clearly indicates the popularity of Queen’s, Western, or an out-of-province university (which includes McGill) among Girl High and Boy High graduates. Approximately one-quarter of Boy High grads plan to attend Western or Queen’s compared to 5% of the TDSB cohort. Approximately one-tenth of Girl High grads plan to attend Western or Queen’s, on average. It is estimated that 2-3% of the TDSB cohort attends an out-of-province or international university. In comparison, almost one-third of Boy High grads and almost half of Girl High grads will attend an out-of-province or international university the following September. (Later in this chapter I return to these differences between Boy High and Girl High.)

Student university preferences are also apparent through noting which universities are rarely or never discussed; legitimate culture is often definable by what is not consumed, or what is consumed in ‘popular’ (illegitimate) culture (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988). One example of this is in which Canadian institutions the university counsellors at Girl High and Boy High invite to make presentations to their students. Both university counsellors acknowledged that some admissions officers are turned away because students historically have not shown interest in that university. Another example of the absence of discussions lies in the connection between academic ability and the imagined distinctions between universities. In the Canadian university landscape, there are universities that have dubious reputations for being easy to get into. For example, a popular and denigrating expression suggests that “walking and talking” are the sole criteria to receive admission to a local university. However, that institution was never discussed during my time at these schools, including among university counsellors, despite it being a viable option for less academically-able students. Instead, students still focused on Queen’s, Western, and McGill. In Ms. Monaco’s grade 12 English class at Girl High, a small
group of students categorized these institutions according to their perceived level of difficulty, as captured in my field notes:

Alicia says “Queen’s seems like the kind of university for people who care about school.” They are contrasting Queen’s with Western, saying that Western is better for people who don’t really care about school that much. Becky asks about McGill. Alicia says “McGill even more so…you need like a 90 to get in."43

Students that struggle academically or lack the commitment to schooling still limit their choice to one of the ‘major ones’, perhaps focusing their attention on receiving admission to Western since it is the university for people who might care less about school. Some students who struggle academically further limit their program of choice within the “major ones”, in most cases selecting a less competitive Arts program. Burton, for example, seemed disengaged from school and the prospect of university. When we talked about university at the back of Mr. Short’s calculus class one day, he shrugged and laughed, saying “I don’t know” when our conversation turned to what he is going to do in university. He said he applied for Arts “and something else, I forget.” This seeming indifference was despite it being only weeks away from having to confirm attendance at a particular university in the fall. Most relevant here is that his disengaged university choice still focused on the “major ones”.

Parents share in the taken-for-granted distinctions between Canadian universities. I did not speak to parents as part of this project, but stories of parental influence emerged in the data and suggest that parents share the same sense of what are appropriate higher education institutions. The case of Sarah is an exemplar, although my interviews with university counsellors tell me that she is not the exception. Sarah began classifying herself as an art student in grade 9 and planned at that point to enrol in a fine arts program after high school. For Sarah, university was always a question of which art school she would attend. However, she notes that

43 In Ontario, a “90” indicates an “A” grade, the highest possible grade, equivalent to an A+ in other provinces and an approximately 3.7 GPA. In this case, the student is referring to a minimum 90 average for admission.
she “didn’t apply to my number one choice. …I’m going to my second preferred.” Her first choice was the Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD), located in Toronto. Asked why she did not complete the OCAD application, she says:

To be honest, it was more of my Dad’s influence because he didn’t really want me going to OCAD, because he thought that OCAD had ‘college’ in its name and was just a college, but it’s actually a university college where you can get your university degree in it, and that’s why I knew [OCAD] is going to be a really good university.

In the Canadian context, where the strongest demarcation in higher education is that between universities and community colleges, the word “college” in the institution’s name acted as a powerful deterrent for attending an institution that was otherwise a perfect fit for Sarah’s passion for art. Based on her father’s opinion, Sarah ends up attending her “second preferred” university, which is a local, large university that she characterizes as “more based on business and maybe science sometimes, and architecture.” When Sarah’s university-going habitus was not aligned with her father’s, he stepped in to ensure that she selected the right cultural product. This example shows the enactment of the constructed distinctions and its effect on student choices.

Why These Particular Canadian Universities?

What are the preferences fuelling the construction of this hierarchy? In this section, I consider the general considerations made by Boy High and Girl High students around universities, consider the importance of a particular program versus an institution more generally, and lastly turn to university preferences rooted in social class.

Among the possible factors that might influence university choice are media rankings of higher education institutions. The influence, however, is questionable. In addition to debates

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44 OCAD has only recently been called “OCAD University.”
over the methodology used by Maclean’s (Page and Cramer 2000), most Canadian research finds that media rankings do not play a prominent role in student decision-making (Drewes and Michael 2006; Kong and Veall 2005). The most widely known national Canadian university rankings have been published annually since 1991 by Maclean’s magazine. In the latest edition (2012 University Rankings), McGill ranks first, Queen’s fourth, and Western ranks eleventh (of 15 universities in the medical-doctoral category) (Maclean’s 2011). With McGill frequently ranking number one, the students could conceivably cite media rankings as a reason why McGill is a “major one”, but they do not. The students at Boy High and Girl High did not discuss any rankings of Canadian universities, Maclean’s or otherwise. The university counsellors were similarly silent on rankings. Furthermore, the students’ ultimate university destinations do not line up with Maclean’s rankings. By way of example, the 2012 annual ranking by Maclean’s puts Western in eleventh place and yet it remains a popular choice. Although students may be aware of Canadian university rankings, these rankings are not a factor in university choice among this population.

Students mention a few reasons why some Canadian universities (the “major ones”) are attractive. Some students discussed a sibling or their friends attending, or a legacy connection. For other students, the location or campus setting was desirable. This was particularly the case for McGill, located in Montréal: “Nicholas says that with Kingston [Ontario] and with London [Ontario], the university is it, whereas Montréal (and Kevin says U of T) isn’t like that; they’ve got cities that the universities happen to be in” (field note). The university counsellor at Girl High said that the city and the lifestyle of McGill were very appealing to the students of Girl

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45 Although there are a number of rankings of Canadian universities and programs, I focus on Maclean’s because they are specifically geared toward Canadian students and families selecting a Canadian university.

46 During the data collection period, the Maclean’s rankings of McGill and Queen’s were the same as in recent years. Western was in ninth place (currently in 11th).
High. She called it an “old favourite.” As far as the head university counsellor at Boy High was concerned, the boys deemed Montréal “too sophisticated”, suggesting that this prevents many boys from applying. In fact, the graduates of Girl High were two times more likely to attend McGill than Boy High graduates (14% versus 7% on average, respectively). In contrast, universities in Toronto had limited appeal because they were perceived to be too close to home. The students praised Toronto as a city; often the conversations on a Monday were centered on the students’ weekend exploits across the city, including clubs, restaurants, and shopping areas. Despite this praise for their city, most students rejected the possibility of attending a Toronto-area university. The University of Toronto, in particular, was discussed far more among students than any other Toronto higher education institution, but the close proximity to home outweighed the positive reputation of the university. This was somewhat less true for Girl High students, however, who were more likely to express some desire to be close to home or at least not reject the idea altogether with as much frequency as found at Boy High. Despite this desire, almost all students that spoke about applying to or attending a Toronto university (most likely the University of Toronto) stated that they would stay in residence in their first year rather than continue to live with their parents. Doing so highlights again how this population is different than the general population, and particularly those from low-income families, where cost and geography are closely intertwined (Frenette 2004). A likely explanation for this is the idea that leaving home to attend university is a step toward adulthood and independence, a sentiment commonly found among more privileged populations (Patiniotis and Holdsworth 2005).

The university’s reach was also a factor for some students. McGill University was credited with having an “international reputation” by some students. Krista, for example, notes

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47 Students at both schools would routinely apologize to me, knowing that I was enrolled at the University of Toronto, but would state nonetheless that U of T was out of the question. The words “too close to home” were said repeatedly by way of explanation.
that this is an important dimension for her because she intends to eventually earn a postgraduate degree. She says:

I only applied to U of T, Queen’s, Western and McGill. I don’t know if this is kind of a snobbish point of view to say but I just feel like in terms of an international level, there’s some schools that are not recognized and are so I wasn’t going to apply to schools like Guelph or Laurier or Mt. A. [Mount Allison] or Huron. … If I do go to Georgetown [for postgraduate studies], or if I do head to Europe to do my post grad studies, I just think it’s better to have something a little more established and well known.

By way of explanation, she noted that her relatives in Europe were really only familiar with a couple of Canadian universities, including McGill. Beyond the popularity of Montréal as a desirable setting, McGill’s recognition at an “international level” was important because of bigger plans related to postgraduate studies. Krista thought it maybe seemed “snobbish” of her to make these distinctions but nonetheless believed that these were important distinctions to make because of her postgraduate plans. Katherine, too, mentioned that she might consider attending a US university for postgraduate study, a sentiment echoed by a number of students: that attending a US university mattered for the degree that they believed to be more important than a bachelor’s degree—their MBA, JD, Master’s, etc. An international reputation seems more closely tied to how well known the university is outside of Canada rather than to a specific academic reputation.

Students do not focus their distinctions on institutions alone. For some students, the draw of a particular university can be explained by a popular program, providing some initial support for the findings of Davies and Hammack (2005) regarding competition in Canada happening over programs and not universities. Queen’s’ highly competitive commerce program and Western’s Ivey business school were attractive to many students. This was particularly the case for students at Boy High (see Table 2). Boy High students expressed interest in gender-typical
fields of study, despite many of them participating in a wide variety of extra-curricular activities including stereotypically female-dominated interests like the arts, and taking courses in a broad range of subjects. A number of teachers, including Mr. Fry, the AP economics teacher, remarked that the boys seemed very “business focused” (field note). As we were having this conversation before his class began, he posed a question to a passing grade 11 student: “Why are the guys here so business focused?” Without skipping a beat, the student replied “Uhh, because we want money” in a tone that suggested he was almost confused by the question, as though the answer was surely terribly obvious. The popularity of commerce programs far surpassed the popularity of any other university program. At presentations given by university admissions officers from Queen’s and Western to the students of Boy High, students were consumed over the chances of receiving admission, as these programs are known to be competitive and require students to have high overall averages. When one student, Chuck, received admission to the Queen’s commerce program, his classmates instantly, simultaneously, and incessantly ask about the admission ‘cut-off’ (grades cut-off) for Commerce. Bill, a serious and bright grade 11 student, reported that Mr. Miller said 87.5%. Chuck, the successful applicant, says 90%. Someone else pipes up and says “well, Chuck’s got a 95, so...” In the same conversation, the students are consumed by talk of required courses. At Girl High, in contrast, no single university program dominated the discussion. Commerce was only one of the popular programs to which Girl High students applied.

However, for both Boy High and Girl High students, the most popular programs were still those at Queen’s, Western, and McGill, despite the same programs being offered at other Canadian universities. This supports the findings of Davies and Hammack (2005) about competition over prestigious programs but also suggests that more matters than just the program.
One demonstration of this is in a speech made to parents and senior students at a university information evening held at Boy High. The head university counsellor discussed the continuing popularity of Queen’s, especially their commerce program; as captured in my field notes from that evening, in reference to the previous year’s graduating class:

[Head university counsellor] says that most students applied to the Commerce program but many didn’t get in, although Boy High has had more students [accepted] than in previous years (despite an 8% admission rate to the program). The head university counsellor had people who didn’t get in who said that “it’s not about business, it’s about Queen’s. I want to be with people I like, at that school, so I’m happy taking Arts.”

In other words, the popularity of Queen’s goes beyond a particular program and is rooted in the institution itself. Students will apply in the same year to a less competitive program, like Arts, at the same university to ensure an offer of admission from their preferred institution. Even when students seem to be favouring a particular program, they are still constructing differences between institutions and making selections on this basis.

Therefore, preferences may operate differently for the students at Girl High and Boy High. McGill’s location in Montréal appeared to be a draw for students at Girl High, and the girls’ preferences were not focused on one particular program. Their primary distinctions are rooted in the institution. The students at Boy High appeared more motivated by their gender-typical preferences for admission to a business program, making Queen’s and Western particular favourites among the Boy High cohort. While these findings do not contradict Davies and Hammack (2005), they suggest that there is greater nuance regarding competition among this segment of the population. Students still prefer a small number of institutions above all others, focusing on the institutions and not necessarily the program.

Students also often stated their preference for particular universities in a very general way not rooted in specific factors like those mentioned above. In these instances, social class was at
the root of their preferences. The sense was that students believe they will be happy at an institution where there are people ‘like them’, which means their friends and other people that share their class background (McDonough 1997). We know from the literature on homophily that people have a preference for sameness; people will choose to be with others like them. Furthermore, attitudes (in this case, around institutional preference) are shared among those in homophilous groups and the complementary processes of association and influence serves to impact choice (Kandel 1978; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). As David, a student at Boy High, says,

I think last year about 20 people went to Queen’s and that’s a fourth of a grad class so it’s huge right? So for some people it’s comfortable. A lot of the private school kids go to Queen’s so it’s sort of a similar atmosphere I guess. So a lot of kids like it.

David’s reflection on the popularity of Queen’s among all private school kids and not just the students at Boy High is revealing for what it says about the taste for particular institutions and how this taste is transmitted from one graduating class to the next, supported by school culture, and shared among a class. He calls Queen’s a “comfortable” choice. While the academic reputation of an institution is likely not irrelevant or unimportant, my data indicate that there are class-related criteria at the root of these three university choices. For example, the University of Western Ontario has a reputation for attracting wealthier students (such as references to “University of Wealthy Ontarians”) (Lodge and Costello 1998).

Another example comes from Mr. Stevens, a popular social science teacher at Boy High, who explained early in my fieldwork what kinds of universities these students apply to and why that might be:

Mr. Stevens says that McGill, Queen’s, and Western are the places that most kids get sent to. “There’s a certain amount of branding that happens, they’re interested in the brands. The parents are too. If we were on the cocktail party circuit, and
you’re my daughter at [local all-girls’ private school], and people ask where you’re going to university and I say that you got into Laurier, they’ll say something like ‘Oh, that’s too bad that she didn’t get into Queen’s’ or wherever.” He says that he sees it especially with the parents.

Mr. Stevens explains student preference through the preferences of parents, suggesting that student preferences are at least partly informed by parental preference. His reference to the “cocktail party circuit” suggests that there are shared understandings among this more privileged part of the population about which universities are considered ‘good schools’. These are the schools that “most kids get sent to.” David’s and Mr. Stevens’ reflections point to the influence of both a school culture and a class culture that reinforce each other and result in a small number of attractive choices. Choice is not just about the quality of an educational institution. Homophily also seems to be a factor.

The references to students “like them”, the cocktail party circuit, and talk of strong social class associations like the “University of Wealthy Ontarians” demonstrate that these distinctions go beyond mere preferences. The students of Boy High and Girl High do not routinely discuss the kind of preferences that we know from previous research to be factors in university choice, like close proximity to home. These students have clear preferences—McGill, Queen’s, and Western—and they are class-based distinctions, the manifested preference of their habitus. Their language around these choices is laden with allusions to status.

In sum, the data indicate that this group of the population makes distinctions in an otherwise non-distinct higher education system. They make very different choices than their peers in the public system. In the absence of hierarchy, Boy High and Girl High students and their families rely on class-based preferences between institutions, despite a lack of evidence—such as labour market measures—that Queen’s, Western, or McGill offer superior education and/or produce better outcomes (for a similar argument about homeschooling, see Aurini and
Davies 2005). It is also the case that many families at Girl High and Boy High turn to the well-established and highly stratified higher education systems in other countries, as evident in Table 2. Universities in the US are regarded as attractive and prestigious options and offer distinction to those students applying and attending. It is to this that I now turn.

THE ‘BRAND NAME’ OPTION: U.S. UNIVERSITIES

The popular appeal of Queen’s, Western, and McGill in Canada pales in comparison to the draw of US universities. A smaller number of students also apply to universities in the UK. Many of these institutions, such as Oxford and the London School of Economics, are known outside of the UK and were spoken of with respect at Girl High and Boy High but did not garner the same awe for successful applicants as did admission to US institutions. This was most evident in the nature of the conversations around these categories of schools. Therefore, I focus mainly on US institutions with an acknowledgement that the few students who attend a recognizable UK university after graduation receive reactions that are closer to successful US university admissions than to successful Canadian university admissions.

Canadian students have closeproximity to US universities, by virtue of geography. Furthermore, the high international tuition fees levied against Canadian students are comparable to the high tuition fees at Girl High and Boy High; research confirms that parental wealth and other markers of social class are associated with studying abroad (King et al. 2011). In addition to proximity and affordability, research on international students studying in the US suggests that these students perceive a superior quality of the education, have comfort with the language and ‘Western’ curriculum, often originate from a culture of studying abroad, and may have grown up in a family where studying abroad was taken for granted (Kim 2011; Szelényi 2006). These
factors present an opportunity to tap into a higher education system that confers distinction if one selects the ‘right’ university. At the same time, the challenge of being offered admission to the most selective and prestigious US institutions is well known, particularly when compared to Canadian university admissions where high school grades are the most important requirement. As a result, and in the context of the Canadian university landscape, US university admission is treated as the ultimate success.

The attractiveness of US institutions was very apparent in the day-to-day at Boy High and Girl High. For example, when a recent Girl High graduate came to visit Girl High for the day, Ms. Trapp, the AP biology teacher, asked where she was currently attending university. When she replied “Berkeley”, the teacher’s response was “Oooohh!” echoed by the rest of the class. On graduation day at Boy High, the “Oooohh” and “Aaaahh” responses to the announcements of which boys were attending a US university the following year were the most audible, much louder than any reaction garnered by successful admission to a Canadian institution. Not surprising, then, that a couple of Boy High students agreed in class one day that parents push their kids to attend an Ivy League institution “for the hype.” Other classroom conversations among students make evident that US high status institutions are regarded as a source of prestigious education and a significant stepping-stone to an important job. For example, in a classroom debate about technology and educational qualifications, one Boy High student stated, “You don’t need 8 years at Columbia to get an engineering degree to build and fix a radio”, to which another student replied “You DO need 8 years at Columbia and an engineering degree to build things like satellites and rockets.” (field note).

As discussed earlier, Boy High and Girl High students largely ignore or disregard media rankings of Canadian institutions. The best example of this is in their preference for Western,
despite it typically ranking ninth place by Maclean’s. In contrast, this population conforms to dominant institutional hierarchies when it comes to international institutions. The preference is for the Ivy League, Oxbridge, prestigious public US universities like Berkeley, and other similarly high-status institutions. Before a Boy High social science class, five grade 11 students were huddled around pages from a magazine that compared the status of US universities. These students, over a year away from university applications, argued over how the universities are classified into tiers and what universities are “good schools”, already engrossed in which US universities carry prestige according to a magazine’s rankings. In a long discussion about universities, Jason at Boy High conveys the preference for elite international universities:

People around here talk a lot about US universities, but I think we’ve got some pretty good universities here [in Canada], so why would you go there? I mean, I know there are the Ivy League schools, but two guys from last year ended up at the University of Vermont. So, ya, they’re in school in the US, but is it a great school? (field note)

Jason questioned the value of attending a US university, just for the sake of attending a US university, over attending a good quality Canadian institution. For him, the University of Vermont is no better than a Canadian university and, unless you are applying to an Ivy League institution, you may as well attend a Canadian university.

US universities carried such prestige that, on a couple of occasions, students told me in an explanatory and apologetic way that they were applying only to Canadian universities. Katherine, for example, listed off the universities she was applying to, finishing with a clarifier: “so…all in Ontario” (field note). Another student at Girl High, Laura, explained that she was “only applying to one Ivy…Brown”, as though applying to only one Ivy League university was an embarrassment (field note). Only among a population with the resources to access these upper-tier institutions does this sentiment seem possible or reasonable. In another example, this
time from Boy High, Mike revealed the pressure and subsequent stress involved in selecting an international university in an environment where those institutions are so revered. For weeks Mike had been talking about attending a University of London institution. In the previous spring Mike had visited the university with his family. When the admissions officer from this university visited Boy High it was clear he had made a point of remembering Mike, including his program interests. Despite being accepted, Mike said he did not think he would go that route thinking he might instead choose a less well-known institution in Scotland instead. But he was hesitant and stated that people do not seem to understand how huge a decision it is to make. We sat together outside of a school classroom one day; he was bouncing his knees up and down while cross-legged and rubbing his forehead repeatedly; he seemed heavy with stress. In his words: “Everyone keeps telling me to go. Ms. Bucks talked to me for 30 minutes over lunch, didn’t let me eat my lunch. Everyone is saying that you can’t pass up these kinds of opportunities. [Pause.] But still, it’s a big move.”

The same institutional hierarchy that appeals to this population is also what makes it difficult to receive an offer of admission. The result is that those students who apply and receive admission are celebrated and distinguished from their peers. University counsellors are among those that wrestle with the power and recognition of US universities, expressing frustration over the challenge of trying to emphasize a good fit between student and institution. As the head counsellor at Boy High stated:

Counsellor: They [students] think that they can access anything. Last year we had a very successful year...Cornell, Cambridge, Oxford (he names a few others), but I see a lot of guys this year wanting to go to places where I know there is no chance.
I: They are reaches.
Counsellor: Yes. And there’s nothing I can say to get through to them.
I: Why do you think that is?
Counsellor: Well...I have some of my own theories. I think it’s partly growing up privileged where you get what you want all of the time.

Both university counsellors expressed struggle and resignation against the belief that you can have it if you can afford it, which is at odds with the reality of US university admission competition. Although the university counsellors struggle to emphasize fit, even they seemed impressed with students who received admission to a US university. Further, they both spoke with some excitement over their increasing involvement with admissions offices of various US universities. In the last few years they had begun to make more campus visits to US campuses—“fact-finding”, as one put it—and, with that, develop relationships with admissions officers. As we know from research out of the US, the quality of these relationships can matter as much as the quality of the applicant (Khan 2011; Persell and Cookson 1985a; Stevens 2007).

CONCLUSION

Bourdieu notes that the notion of taste implies freedom of choice; cultural products and practices need not serve a function. Freedom from function is itself a symbolic display of status. All Canadian universities have the function of granting educational credentials, but this population makes finer distinctions. Previous research has made it quite clear that this occurs in societies with stratified higher education systems, such as the US, UK, and France. Researchers in these countries have found that students and families make distinctions between institutions. The research reported here illustrates a similar tendency in Canada, despite lacking a comparable prestige hierarchy between cultural products. The absence of an entrenched hierarchy means there is freedom to construct hierarchies between institutions where they are not otherwise apparent. This chapter sheds light on constructing those distinctions. These distinctions have real consequences for the university choice process in an elite private school, shaping the
decision-making of many students, much like distinctions do in other countries with highly stratified higher education systems.

First, this privileged group of Canadians elevates a small number of Canadian universities. Knowledge about which Canadian universities are worth applying to is shared among students, their families, and the high schools, constructing distinctions in a system that lacks formal stratification or well-established differences. The criteria do not neatly match criteria that we might expect to drive university choice. Location and proximity did not influence the students in the same way found by other researchers. While students in the public system were most likely to attend a Toronto-area institution, suggesting the importance of proximity, Boy High and Girl High students were clearly influenced differently by proximity; the “major ones” are each located at least 2 hours from Toronto. Location could be a draw—as is the case for Montréal—but close proximity deterred many students from those institutions. In addition, students did express interest in programs known to be competitive (Davies and Hammack 2005) but restricted their choice of program to a narrow set of popular universities, despite similar programs offered elsewhere. This was particularly true for students at Boy High who held strong preferences for a smaller number of programs. Furthermore, some students will accept admission to a less competitive program at their preferred university, prioritizing the institution over the program.

Many students referenced a desire to attend a Canadian institution that had other students ‘like them’ (McDonough 1997); the popularity of these schools at both Boy High and Girl High and references to the cocktail party circuit suggest a popularity shared by the Toronto private school population as a whole, which likely helps perpetuate the popularity of these university choices. Their distinctions go beyond mere preferences, because they are rooted in social status.
Taste for particular cultural products—in this case, higher education institutions—is the manifestation of habitus, itself rooted in social class. This understanding of distinctions and university choice helps make sense of why particular institutions continue to be popular despite low media rankings (as in the case of Western) and despite competitive programs that put successful admission to that program outside the reach of many students.

Second, many individuals within this segment of the population look to the US higher education system—with its steep institutional hierarchies—for university admission. Because of the time and competitiveness associated with US university applications, and in a non-hierarchical context, an offer to a US university is particularly celebrated. The individuals at Girl High and Boy High readily follow the dominant institutional hierarchies of these US and other international institutions, elevating the likes of Oxbridge, Berkeley, and Cornell above other institutions. This underscores the finding that this population is interested in the distinction that can come from selecting the most legitimate cultural products, made easier by the well-recognized steep institutional hierarchy in the US.

As representatives of Boy High and Girl High, university counsellors largely abide by the constructed distinctions in the Canadian higher education system and the popularity of US institutions. The stories told by university counsellors about parents typically involved parents stepping in when their child was at risk of making a choice with which they disagreed. The counsellors expressed some tension over whom to treat as their client, finding that parents can be a strong influence because Girl High and Boy High are not public schools. As mediators of a privileged class culture where little in the way of educational decision-making is left to chance, the university counsellors end up guiding students in a way that will keep parents—who pay the tuition—happy.
This group of motivated students is matched by an organization—their school—intent on seeing them succeed in their university applications. Their choices are quite narrow—a few Canadian universities, competitive Canadian programs, and the notoriously competitive US university landscape. As one can imagine, this puts additional pressure on students to develop their “meritorious traits” and do extremely well in their classes.

In the final chapter, I draw conclusions across the preceding chapters and speak to the implications of these findings for private schools as well as the state-funded school system in Canada.
Chapter 7

CONCLUSION

Elite reproduction is not a matter of the stars aligning perfectly so that privileged students are seamlessly rewarded by virtue of their class background by a private school mandated to meet their needs. There is stress. There is effort. There is careful planning. This is no more apparent than in the final year of high school when students experience the culmination of their years of private schooling and are focused on making a solid transition into postsecondary education. Their postsecondary preferences are a small set of competitive programs and distinguished institutions within Canada and abroad. Teachers, students, and the school more broadly work to maximize the advantages available, whether that be in offering personalized university counselling (Chapter 6), negotiating over how marks are calculated and rewarding students’ initiatives in that vein (Chapter 4), or creating a school environment designed to engage students (Chapter 5), perhaps at the cost of reinforcing gender stereotypes. In this chapter, I return to the dominant themes of this analysis, framed in terms of class and gender reproduction. Because I am frequently asked about what these findings could mean for the public education system, I also comment on whether any valuable changes could be made to level the playing field between students attending schools like Boy High and Girl High and those enrolled in the publicly-funded education system. I conclude this chapter with some of the questions that have emerged from this research that may be deserving of further study.

GIRL POWER, BOY POWER, CLASS POWER
As the current study has demonstrated, there are striking benefits associated with attending a private school in Canada. Some of these advantages are embedded within the institution while others are a product of one’s social class background. In this section, I return to the dominant themes captured through this research and in the sociology of education literature, framing the discussion vis-à-vis benefits associated with Boy High and Girl High. A number of those benefits are quite tangible. First, there are opportunities to capitalize on a positive student/teacher relationship. These negotiations have a number of benefits, including improved grades, a tailored classroom environment, and extra help and coaching on important tests and exams (including AP exams). Teachers appear willing to collude with students in their quest to have the best possible university applicant profile. In light of the university focus of Girl High and Boy High, this is not surprising. So much of what happens at Girl High and Boy High can be understood in terms of its university prep focus.

But we can also understand these patterns according to the economic reproduction framework of Bowles and Gintis captured in *Schooling in Capitalist America*. They argue that there is a correspondence between the social relations of work in a capitalist system and the social relations of schooling. Their analysis focuses primarily on how schools prepare future workers by rewarding and penalizing particular traits in accordance with the needs of capitalism. Less attention is paid to students in wealthier neighbourhoods, but subsequent research by Jean Anyon (1980, 1981) found that schools in different kinds of neighbourhoods were indeed marked by different kinds of classroom practices. Of particular relevance here is her finding that classrooms in affluent professional schools and executive schools were marked by teachers controlling the classroom through negotiation with students, and students enjoying a degree of control in the classroom.
This is consistent with the practices at Boy High and Girl High (a discussion of differences between these schools is found in the section that follows). The students display ownership over their education in the classroom and in their interactions with teachers that are unique when compared to other school settings, especially schools in working-class neighbourhoods (Anyon 1980, 1981). They are served by the ‘whole child’ philosophy espoused by Boy High and Girl High that regards this behaviour as a sign of leadership and encourages students and teachers to look for opportunities to collaborate on the students’ education, as these are important steps for students destined for great things in the world. According to the economic structure argument articulated by Bowles and Gintis in *Schooling in Capitalist America*, these classroom patterns relate to what the students can anticipate doing in the labour market. The words of Anyon are echoed by the wording contained within school documents produced by Boy High and Girl High, captured best in the following quote from a Girl High document, first seen in Chapter 2: “In preparing [Girl High] students to thrive within a world of complex networks and interdependencies, we must provide them with the tools and opportunities to use their intellectual capacity to probe the layers of a problem.”

Although the correspondence principle has been critiqued as deterministic and functionalist, it is a useful framework for understanding some of these classroom practices at Boy High and Girl High. It provides some important theoretical context. But, as my analysis makes clear, it is not enough to put classroom practices within the context of an economic structure and the presumed destinations of Girl High and Boy High students. The students, after all, are the ones showing the initiative and seeking accommodations. We must consider the ways that these students are actors, shaping the classroom and influencing their educational outcomes through interactions with their teachers. This shift in theorizing largely came about through
sociologists focused on the ways that culture contributes to the reproduction of inequality. Not only did we learn from these sociologists (like Willis, MacLeod, McRobbie, Gaskell, and others) what can be observed by entering into the classroom and spending time getting to know the teachers, administrators, and students, but we also learned that student action can oftentimes shape their experiences with the education system and their educational outcomes.

A second tangible benefit to Boy High and Girl High is the abundance of university support available to students as they work toward making their transition to higher education. Girl High and Boy High introduce the topic of university early and often. They have staff specifically devoted to university admissions. These are some of the benefits embedded within educational institutions like Boy High and Girl High. We know this from the existing literature in the sociology of education. We also know that students attending these private schools typically have a university-going habitus. These students cannot remember a time when they chose to attend university, or remember thinking there was ever an alternative. What is new is how these students navigate a Canadian university landscape not known for a steep hierarchy between institutions. In detailing the university choice process among this population of students, one can see how university preferences are often motivated by social class. A taste for a particular cultural product is the manifestation of habitus (Bourdieu 1984); thinking of university choice through this framework reveals how the factors influencing the construction of a university hierarchy are rooted in social class and not straightforward or neutral preferences.

A somewhat intangible benefit to attending Boy High and Girl High is the focus on what Khan (2011) calls meritorious traits, which are characteristics that might appear rooted in natural talent but are associated with social class. The prime example of this at Boy High and Girl High is leadership. These schools offer a great number of possibilities for students to be leaders at
their school and even exercise some authority among their peers. Aside from the clubs and student councils, there are house leaders, prefects, and grade representatives. Students can start their own clubs and student awards. They are central to the planning of school charity events. They tutor less privileged students. They immerse themselves in local and international communities as volunteers, helping others. Students can also develop confidence and leadership through their negotiations with teachers. Students enter as products of their family background, with a sense of entitlement to seek out the individual preferences that most suit their needs (Lareau 2003). The schools foster leadership and importance by legitimating students’ entitlement by meeting their requests for things like grade adjustments and changes to the lesson plan.

Overall, one can see a number of ways that students attending elite schools like Boy High and Girl High benefit from the structure of the school and from their own actions, legitimated by a school context intent on fostering importance. It is useful to compare these findings to a classic text on elite boarding schools, *Preparing for Power* (Cookson and Persell 1985). Cookson and Persell imagine private schools molding and re-shaping a class-based identity. They argue that these schools are total institutions, powerful forces in developing class solidarity among the most privileged students. Without paying as much attention to the students within these schools as they do to the structure and schedule of the school, *Preparing for Power* reads like a matter of socialization. And, so often, socialization can sound like determinism of the school and conformity in its students. I find it more accurate to say that these schools are the sites of students shaping their opportunities, and not just that students benefit from the opportunities embedded within the structure of the school. Students enter into these institutions informed by their family social class background, already predisposed to university and with an attitude of
entitlement to see their individual preferences fulfilled, for example. Students actively influence their educational experiences and outcomes. At the same time, however, the idea of conformity is not entirely inapplicable. These students are indeed conforming to institutional expectations. Where conformity in students is so often imagined to be about students muting their agency in the face of teacher authority, conformity at Boy High and Girl High is about agency. These schools want leadership in their students. They want to see initiative. They want to see some of the promise of these students exercised in their earliest years within their school walls. They want to see students influencing their educational outcomes. Action, conformity, and socialization are all useful ways to think about some of the processes that take place at institutions like Girl High and Boy High.

Isolating social class reproduction, these processes seem advantageous to all students, male and female. However, there are some differences between Boy High and Girl High that connect to class reproduction, suggesting that these relatively privileged boys and girls may experience reproduction differently. I turn to this in the next section.

*Gendered Class Reproduction*

Girl High and Boy High are institutions structured not just by privilege but also by gender. By looking at a girls’ private school—so rarely done in the sociology of education—and comparing a girls’ school to a boys’ school, it becomes possible to note the ways the schools are similarly and differently structured. Some of the opportunities that may help reproduce privilege are the same across both schools. For example, the development of meritorious traits is gender-neutral. Both Boy High and Girl High offer countless opportunities to boost university applications, namely in the form of student council opportunities, grade and house leadership
positions, and student-led clubs, and they encourage students to create new awards and clubs as the students see fit. One result is that the boys and girls of these schools are both in good positions for their university applications.

At the same time, one can see that some advantages and opportunities are differently distributed. This is most apparent in the negotiations or collusions between teachers and students. It was more common for the Boy High students to pursue their interests around grades, lessons, and deadlines than it was for the students at Girl High. When the female students did seek these accommodations, they were not always as successful. It would appear that the male students’ efforts were legitimated more because their attempts at controlling classroom practices were more successful and more frequent. A process that has the potential to create advantage for students is different in these differently gendered contexts.

We should understand this pattern to be a result of the institutional contexts, particularly the fact that these schools are based on a gender binary. With this comes the belief in boys and girls possessing different natures, abilities, and interests. Teachers at Girl High took a more paternalistic approach to students, closing off some opportunities for students to take initiative and seek similar accommodations to those sought at Boy High. It seemed as though teachers and administrators believed the students at Girl High were in need of nurturing and care during times of stress. Sometimes this would lead to deadlines being extended, but this was typically initiated by teachers and not by students. It is somewhat ironic that the Girl High students seemed less able to successfully negotiate with teachers—Girl High espouses girl power, after all. Surely it would be possible to interpret accommodation-seeking at Girl High as a sign of leadership and confidence, much like it was at Boy High.
Much like McRobbie (2000) and Gaskell (1992) identified through their work on working-class boys’ and girls’ experiences with schooling, class reproduction is experienced differently by gender. The school populations of Boy High and Girl High are quite different than those working-class populations, but a similar conclusion could be made: social class reproduction might operate differently and be experienced differently by male and female students. In the next section, I discuss gender reproduction.

*Gender Reproduction*

One final aspect of the analysis was to consider the ways gender is reproduced in each of these settings. One striking contrast is the degree to which gender inequality is addressed in these contexts. At Boy High, gender inequality was very rarely a point of discussion. The result of this is the male students were very rarely given the opportunity to think of themselves as gendered beings, to critically examine gender inequality, or even to think more about the significance of single-gender schools. An example of this is in regards to a White Ribbon Campaign poster in an English classroom. The White Ribbon Campaign is a local (and now international) initiative spearheaded by men to eradicate violence against women. The poster indicated that Boy High had participated in a White Ribbon Campaign event at the school. It featured a man’s white sleeveless undershirt with the words “undershirt” and “wife-beater” beneath it, with tick-boxes next to each word to select the appropriate term for the shirt. A student had put a bold checkmark within the ‘wife-beater’ box. The teacher left the poster in her room as a kind of teachable moment. The student who told me this story conveyed that the teacher was a feminist (he said that all female teachers at his school were feminists) and that the students thought it was funny to check the ‘wife-beater’ box. His telling of the story conveyed a

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48 “Wife-beater” is a common slang term for these white sleeveless men’s undershirts.
real lack of engagement with gender inequality, feminism, and masculinity. As is often the case, ‘gender’ means ‘female’ in this environment.

In contrast, the students at Girl High have more of an opportunity to engage with feminist ideas and think about gender inequality. In classrooms promoting discussion, the idea of gender was occasionally raised as a topic of conversation. The girls also heard about barriers like the glass ceiling, and understood their school motto to be about overcoming some of those barriers. However, these discussions very much conveyed the social class background of these students. Their understanding of gender was classed. Yes, they had more of an awareness of gender inequality, but Girl High typically conveyed the message that these were simply barriers to be overcome by being strong women and making the right kind of choices. Their lessons focused on the lives of women “out there”, especially in third-world countries, lives that Girl High students could change.

Overall, despite these being gender-segregated settings where one could imagine gender at the fore of the students’ minds, the male and female students did not engage with ideas like men and women having different kinds of opportunities and constraints in life. There were little to no opportunities to think critically about gender roles, stereotypes, and inequalities. At first glance, this is particularly interesting in light of the ‘girl power’ theme at Girl High. However, Girl High is contradictory in its use of girl power on the one hand but gender stereotypes on the other. Because of this, one should not automatically assume that a school that espouses ‘girl power’ and uses a motto that seems feminist would be a venue to really engage with gender issues.

The contradiction at Girl High forces us to be more critical of something like the kinds of field of study choices the Girl High students make for their transition to university. Although I
do not have systematic data from Girl High, I know from my conversations with the students and university counsellors that students were planning on pursuing degrees in a range of fields, including some that are traditionally male. While this finding is not as dramatic in light of Maxwell and Maxwell’s (1994) prediction that gender barriers would eventually be removed among elite women vis-à-vis their career choices, it is encouraging to know that there are female students selecting fields of study beyond the stereotypically female fields of study like nursing and teaching. However, we have reason to be skeptical about the role of Girl High’s messages of girl power breaking down gender barriers, given these messages rely on gender stereotypes. It is possible that these girls’ choices emerge more from their social class background; they are less bound by financial constraints and can therefore make choices across a broader range of fields of study, including fields of study not directly connected to a career. This may be especially the case in light of a number of these students’ plans to earn a postgraduate degree (Goyette and Mullen 2006).

Arguably, these single-gender schools are contributing to the salience of gender boundaries. Work by Thorne (1993) and Messner (2000) demonstrates how gender boundaries are particularly noticeable in coeducational contexts. Boy High and Girl High are not coeducational environments, but the gender boundaries are quite evident. The students’ gender is talked about repeatedly—their different styles of learning and sets of interests, for example—so that there is always an ‘other’. These schools are not breaking down the barriers of gender or providing opportunities to think about the ‘other’. Instead, they are largely drawing on and

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49 Messner’s argument is nuanced. One component of this argument is that gender becomes particularly salient in gender-mixed environments that are nonetheless otherwise structured by segregation (such as his example of a soccer league and its teams). Gender and the boundaries between gender become more noticeable in gender-mixed settings.
therefore reinforcing many gender stereotypes. This is even when they intend to defy these stereotypes, as is the case of Girl High.

In the next section of this chapter, I review Chapters 3 to 6 with the implications for public schooling in Canada in mind.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PUBLIC SCHOOLING IN CANADA

The Role of Teachers

In Chapter 4, I discuss the relationship between teachers and students that can be transformed into benefits to students if they take initiative and attempt to negotiate and collaborate with their teachers. Are these advantageous student/teacher relations replicable in other educational settings? Can these findings translate into the public setting and transform student/teacher relations into something that can benefit students at a time when they might most need it—transitioning out of high school? Girl High and Boy High both espoused a “whole child” philosophy that rewards personality traits like initiative and entitlement as much as academic excellence. This meant that teachers would go out of their way to create these opportunities, setting them apart from the teachers in Calarco’s (2011a) study of a more typical state-funded school setting where teachers did no more than try to meet the needs of the middle-class children who were seeking accommodations on their own volition. So much of this seems to depend on the school context. Furthermore, students bring with them their dispositions toward help-seeking behaviour that were fostered within their families (Lareau 2003). Thus it is more privileged children who enter the school environment with a sense of entitlement to seek accommodations for their individual preferences and exhibit a greater comfort with authorities and institutional settings.
Moving forward, one possibility in terms of policy is to create more awareness among teachers about the class-based dimension of accommodation-seeking behaviour. If Calarco’s (2011a, 2011b) findings are representative of what you might find in other state-funded schools, teachers do not encourage this behaviour but respond to (and thus legitimize) the accommodation-seeking behaviour of middle-class students. Teachers might consider being more explicit about their expectations in this regard and try to foster those behaviours among less privileged students. At Girl High and Boy High, students sought accommodations over very significant aspects of their schooling, including how their final grades were calculated. But accommodations might include any number of things, and it seems important to encourage students to be active in their education. In a sense, this might level the playing field slightly and engender what I call educational savvy, which then might pay dividends for more students.

In addition, schools more generally might think about fostering these more equitable and beneficial relationships among students and teachers. While all schools may not espouse a “whole child” philosophy, my analysis indicates that entitlement and initiative is interpreted in particular ways when the school context is mindful of nurturing particular personality traits and not just academic success.

Turning a Critical Eye toward Single-Gender Schooling

Much of the research assessing the benefits of single-gender education focuses narrowly on one particular measure: differences in academic achievement in specific subject matter. If researchers can identify improvements in math and science for girls and English for boys, then gender-segregated classrooms or schools are declared a success. And yet as more and more school boards consider incorporating gender segregated classrooms into their curriculum—or
creating gender-segregated schools, as we’ve see most recently with the Toronto District School Board—the rhetoric is not just about improving scores in these subject areas. Journalists, parents, and education experts attach great significance to the potential of segregated education; these schools might address the bigger trends in boys’ educational trajectories around dropping out, they might be the answer to the over-diagnosis of learning disabilities and ADHD in boys, and they might even boost girls’ confidence and create a ‘do anything’ ethic that can produce future female scientists and mathematicians.

At Boy High and Girl High, administrators held strong beliefs regarding gender difference. In a sense, they have to; they are serving a population interested in an education that will serve what they believe to be the unique needs of boys or girls. But as public schools tinker more with single-gender experiments, they will be moving further in the direction of using gender difference to craft an educational environment. To say that coeducational environments are wrought with issues for boys and girls is not the same as saying that single-gender environments do not also have issues around gender equity or are somehow not sexist. Gender stereotypes are very apparent in the school culture of Boy High and Girl High. At Boy High, and in any other all-boys’ environment, drawing on gender stereotypes neglects the students who are furthest from hegemonic masculinity. At Girl High, there is a real tension between drawing on stereotypes and encouraging girls to then defy those stereotypes and chart a non-traditional path. It is an environment where administrators believe they are truly challenging girls to embrace their gender, embrace girl power, and break glass ceilings or any other obstacle in their way.

Should single-gender classrooms and experiments be abandoned altogether? This does not seem realistic. There is a history of elite single-gender schooling in Canada that carries a lot of significance for privileged Canadian families, and evidently a market for single-gender
education. Instead, schools should examine how gender operates in the everyday practices within classrooms, in the hallways, and in curriculum planning. At any all-boys’ institution, including Boy High, the gender order should be interrogated. Gender was very rarely a topic of conversation at Boy High, suggesting that male privilege made gender invisible in this setting. Based on some of the behaviour I witnessed and conversations I heard about women, as well as the sports-focused nature of the school—all suggesting hegemonic masculinity—Boy High and any other all-boys institution would be well-served by encouraging its students to think more critically about gender difference and gender privilege.

At Girl High or any other all-girls’ school or classroom, girls should hear empowering messages matched with a sociological, structural understanding of gender inequality. They should be encouraged to identify the ways in which gender invisibly influences their everyday lives in the school context and in their relationships with family, friends, and significant others, and learn to think more critically about the gendered world that lies beyond the walls of the school. The students at Girl High lacked a comprehensive understanding of the significance of gender, and their school did nothing to improve this by drawing on stereotypes and discussing gender equity in only the shallowest of ways.

Transitioning to University

What can we learn from elite private schools where 100 percent of the graduating class goes on to university, including competitive programs within Canada and elite universities abroad? What can we learn from schools with enormous resources that make it possible to have guidance counsellors devoted exclusively to university counselling? Despite the unique environments of Boy High and Girl High, we are at an interesting point in Canadian higher
education and can learn from the nature of university counselling and competition at Boy High and Girl High. As I discuss in this section, one can see from Boy High and Girl High how these potential changes in the Canadian higher education marketplace might have implications for all high school students.

As Bourdieu (1984) notes, tastes depend upon the goods offered and vice versa, and so a change to the system of available cultural products induces changes in tastes; this is the dialectic between tastes and cultural products. Davies and Zarifa (2012) find modest indications that hierarchies may be developing among Canadian universities (although still far less stratified than other countries). In addition, Davies, Maldonado, and Zarifa (2012) find evidence of public high school graduates from wealthier Toronto neighbourhoods attending Ontario universities with somewhat greater resources, only partly explained by academic ability. Given the class-based preferences among the population served by Girl High and Boy High, it is not inconceivable to imagine a formal hierarchy developing among Canadian institutions as elite students self-select in to particular universities. Another possible driver for this trend is connected to endowments; although public higher education institutions rely on tuition, private and corporate donations may grow in importance in the face of government cutbacks. As a result, those institutions with high-SES future alumni could become more attractive institutions by virtue of greater resources. Furthermore, there is an ongoing differentiation debate about the state of university education in Canada. The leaders of some of Canada’s largest universities have called for a more stratified higher education system, mainly through adjusting how government research funds are allocated and which institutions focus exclusively on baccalaureate education (Taylor 2009; Wells 2009). These calls have been backed by individuals involved in post-secondary education policy, who
argue that this is the direction we can expect in Ontario (Clark et al. 2009; Weingarten and Deller 2010).

While still only in its infancy, this could bring enormous changes to the higher education system in Canada. With this comes the possibility that Bachelor’s degrees from different Canadian institutions will carry different relative values, as is the case in the US. All told, the Canadian higher education system could be at the beginnings of radical changes, changing the face of university choice in Canada. Until then, Canadian elite students, parents, and educational institutions will likely continue to construct distinctions among Canadian higher education institutions or tap into well-established hierarchies in other higher education markets.

Public schools are bound by finite resources in a way not experienced by private schools. This limits the possibility of creating guidance counsellors devoted specifically to higher education. This may also seem beyond the scope of many public schools, given that schools reflect the neighbourhoods in which they are situated; higher education counsellors may seem unnecessary or even extravagant in a school setting dealing with high dropout rates and low student engagement, for example. All that said, we know from the literature on institutional habitus and higher education that some students’ habitus might alter in response to their high school environment (Oliver and Kettley 2010; Reay, David, and Ball 2001). If the resources allow it, including a higher education counsellor might engage more students with the possibility of attending a post-secondary institution. Furthermore, having a counsellor devoted specifically to higher education would mean having an expert on all of the possibilities available to students, whether they are interested in attending a college or university in Canada or elsewhere. This is most important for students whose parents lack the cultural capital of knowing about higher education programs and options (McDonough 1997). As it stands now, most guidance
counsellors are over-burdened with too many students with a diverse set of needs, only one of which is learning about the higher education possibilities.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

In the final section of this conclusion, I identify some of the questions that have emerged from this study, suggesting avenues for further inquiry. These are in addition to the questions articulated in the conclusion to Chapter 4 regarding the role of teachers. One area that deserves additional attention is centred on the contradiction at Girl High between messages that encourage the students to challenge gender stereotypes while the school draws on those same stereotypes in an effort to engage students and meet their interests. In a survey of all Canadian girls’ schools, would one find this same contradiction throughout? While many of these schools very likely espouse an “Achieve Your Dream!” ethic, much like Girl High, they also must differentiate themselves from other girls’ schools operating in their local market. What is their particular ‘take’ on girl power? Is this discourse matched by what is in the classroom? An interesting comparison case would be an all-girls’ school that educates girls from a greater variety of social class backgrounds or from a similarly homogenous but working-class population. Through asking these kinds of questions, one can learn about the various ways that gender roles and expectations for women are understood and conveyed to students, and the ways these messages vary by class, and the extent to which these messages resonate with students.

Somewhat related, I find the silence on gender issues and gender inequality at Boy High troubling and believe that questions should be asked about whether there are implications for this for the students at Boy High and schools like it. During my time at Boy High, I frequently reflected on how the students would benefit from being around females more because it would
help normalize women. Too often I heard females talked about in very stereotypical and sexist ways. Do students immersed in these settings possess more sexist attitudes than boys attending coeducational schools? Do they possess gender-traditional beliefs or attitudes about the roles of men and women in society and in the family? Asking questions of this nature could provide some definitive policy suggestions for single-gender schooling, for both private and public spheres.

Finally, and in relation to university choice in Canada, a number of questions are raised regarding the finding that these students narrow the field of all possible Canadian institutions to three—the “major ones” of Queen’s, Western, and McGill. First, how far-reaching is the belief that these three institutions are the universities worth attending? The students, teachers, and university counsellors imply that many private school students attend these universities and that parents have a strong preference that their children attend one of these institutions. But do others beyond this small circle of individuals also believe these are the universities worth attending? And, are there benefits to following this normative path, such as the development of social capital, or perhaps in terms of the labour market, whereby a credential from any of these institutions acts as a signal to some employers? Second, what are the “major ones” across Canada? These choices seem at least somewhat influenced by geography, suggesting that local private school markets may have a different set of preferred institutions. If the institutions are different, do the students and others in that private school exhibit some of the same class-based preferences?

CONCLUSION
Through this research, I set out to contribute to the relatively small area of research on elite single-gender schools in the sociology of education. I hoped to bring some theoretical attention to girls’ experiences within a privileged educational setting like Girl High as well as provide additional depth to our understanding of some of the mechanisms that produce advantage for the boys and girls attending elite schools. Being mindful of advantages embedded within institutions like Boy High and Girl High is just one important task; equally important is to focus on the ways that students create their own advantages—assisted by the predispositions that emerge from their family background—through their actions and interactions with those in the school setting. There truly is a kind of dualism of structure and agency at work. Equally important is to be mindful of the ways that class and gender are intertwined in settings like Boy High and Girl High, as they educate boys and girls from predominantly wealthy families in a gender-segregated educational environment. Any analysis must be attuned to class and gender at all times; doing so will continue to fill in some of our gaps in understanding class and gender reproduction among the privileged, given the historical focus on boys’ school environments.
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Appendices

Appendix A: CAIS and CIS Ontario membership criteria

CAIS Membership Guidelines:

All members must meet and continue to meet the following requirements:

1. The Board of Governors is elected and structured to oversee the mission, vision, values, and strategy of the school. The Board hires one Head of School to manage the school’s day-to-day operations. The rest of the school's senior administration reports to the Head of School.

2. School leadership practices ethically in the areas of employment, admissions, recruitment and fund-raising.

3. The School demonstrates long-term viability.

4. Heads and Chairs attend the annual conference during which an Annual General Meeting is held.

5. The School meets the National Standards and undergoes an accreditation process every seven years (unless a different cycle is mutually agreed upon by the School and the Board).

6. The School pays the annual fee.


8. The School participates in annual Research Projects, including Benchmarking and Compensation Surveys.

9. The School supports joint projects that are endorsed by the membership at the Annual General Meeting. Specific projects include the following:

   - Regular networking/professional development conferences for Junior and Middle School Heads, Development Officers, Business Officers, Assistant Heads, Admissions Officers, and others as approved by the National PD Steering Committee
   - Student Leadership Conference - Annual conferences for student leaders
   - Leadership Institute - offering training for administrative positions
   - Career Opportunities Board on website - for job postings
   - Additional research projects: eg. National Tracking Project, Governance Practices, etc.
   - Website
   - Listservs
CIS Ontario Membership Guidelines

Membership Criteria

Members of the Conference of Independent Schools of Ontario meet the following membership criteria upon entry:

**Academic Program:** The school provides an academic program of study that qualifies students for entrance to university. This would include a school that provides academic programs that qualify students for entrance to such schools.

**Governance:** The governing body and the administration of the school are at arm's length from each other. Their respective roles and the proper relationship between the two groups are clearly defined and generally consistent with the definition of "arm's length." At least 80% of the members of the governing body are not part of, or in any way associated with, the administration of the school.

**Financial Stability:** The school has operated for a sufficient period of time to have demonstrated that it is capable of operating with reasonable financial stability and of sustaining the required academic program, or has otherwise demonstrated such capability.

**Reputation:** The school has a reputation for excellence and integrity achieved over a period of several years in operation and generally recognized by the membership of CIS and the public at large.

**Visitation and Formal Approval:** The school must be visited and endorsed by at least two heads of schools who are currently members of CIS. Their endorsement must be recommended by the Nominating and Governance Committee and the Board of Directors of CIS, and approved by at least 75% of the votes cast at a general meeting of member schools at which at least 66-2/3% of the membership are present or represented by proxy.
Appendix B: Consent Forms

Letter consenting to research, signed by senior school head of each school:

(University of Toronto Letterhead)

Date

School Administrator Name
School Name

As we have already discussed, I am interested in studying independent schools as part of my dissertation in the department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. The project is a comparative study in gender and education. I intend to address some of the important questions being asked about independent schools, single-gender education, and students' aspirations. This is an important and under-studied topic in Canada. My results will be disseminated in the following ways: a research report will be made available to each of the participating independent schools, a dissertation, and subsequent papers published in scholarly journals.

Your independent school has a rigorous curriculum and rich student life, which makes it an ideal location to conduct research on education. Furthermore, conducting research at single-gender schools provides an opportunity to do comparative work on gender and education. The conclusions of this research will, I believe, be of use to your school and the broader independent school community.

The primary research methodology is participant observation; the researcher becomes immersed in the culture or group of interest to achieve greater understanding. Since immersion in daily routine is the goal of this methodology, participants should experience no interruption to their daily lives. Fieldwork will take place at two single-gender schools concurrently; since the goal is comparative, it is important to be at the sites simultaneously as much as possible so that the comparison is possible. The proposed approach is three days in school A in week 1, followed by three days in school B in week 2, and so on. I will have a weekly check-in with the administration about my participation, to encourage an ongoing discussion about the extent of my participation and what suits the school. Touching base regularly in this way will ensure that all parties are dialoguing about the study.

In addition to participating in student life, I request access to the written documents that are circulated to current and prospective students and families (for example, student handbooks). This will provide information on student life, school expectations, curriculum, etc. Finally, I request access to alumni information. No identifying information will be collected, and confidence will be strictly maintained. Alumni information will provide the researcher with a greater sense of what the graduates of your school go on to do later in life.

The research participants will primarily be grade 11 and grade 12 students. These participants may withdraw, without consequence, at any time. If a student participant chooses to withdraw, effort will be made to minimize or eliminate interaction with the student. The independent school name, all participants’ names, and other identifying information will be kept confidential throughout the research project (from data collection to the dissemination of results).
naming is appropriate (such as in direct quotes or discussing an interaction), pseudonyms will be used. Only the researcher will have access to the collected data, and data will be stored in a secure location.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me (jayne.baker@utoronto.ca or [redacted]). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor at the University of Toronto, Dr. Sandy Welsh ([redacted] or welsh@chass.utoronto.ca) or the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto (416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca) for information about the rights of participants.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read this information letter and agree that the school will participate in the study.

_________________________________________     ___________________________
Administrator Signature                      Date
Interview consent forms: Headmaster at Boy High, principal at Girl High, senior school heads of Boy High and Girl High, university counsellors of Boy High and Girl High, and student exit interviews

(University of Toronto letterhead)

Dear [Headmaster/Senior School Head Name]:

As you may already know, I am a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, doing research at your school as part of my dissertation.

I am interested in students’ expectations for the future, how they are preparing for their futures, and how the independent school supports their aspirations and creates opportunities. Independent schools have optimal resources, enabling them to provide a rich experience and numerous opportunities for their students. Given your position, you have a comprehensive understanding of [school name] and can enrich my research with your perspective.

I would like to interview you about your important role in the school; given your position, you have a comprehensive understanding of [school name] and can enrich my research with your perspective. You may choose to withdraw, without consequence, at any time. The interview will be recorded, but the recording device may be paused or stopped at any time at your request. All students, teachers, and administrators will remain unidentified throughout the research project (from the beginning of the study to the written results).

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me (jayne.baker@utoronto.ca or 416-712-4442). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor at the University of Toronto, Dr. Sandy Welsh (welsh@chass.utoronto.ca) or the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto (416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca) for information about the rights of participants.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read this information letter and agree to be interviewed.

_________________________________  _______________________
Administrator Signature                   Date
Dear University Counsellor:

As we have already discussed, I am interested in including the completed parent and student university questionnaires as part of my dissertation. The university counselling centre is an example of the resources available at an independent school that provide opportunities for students and supports aspirations. The questionnaire responses offer an opportunity to consider the expectations of students and parents in regards to university, and how the university counsellors use this information to help students and parents navigate both the post-secondary school choices and the expectations that parents and students bring with them.

Those students and parents who have completed the questionnaire will be included in this portion of the methodology. Given that communication between the school and students and parents happens via email, I will follow the same format and send an email outlining the project and requesting permission to include the completed questionnaire in my dissertation.

The questionnaire asks students and parents to put their names on the top of the front page. To maintain confidentiality, the student and their parent will be assigned numbers in lieu of their names.

If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me (jayne.baker@utoronto.ca or 416-712-4442). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor at the University of Toronto, Dr. Sandy Welsh (welsh@chass.utoronto.ca) or the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto (416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca) for information about the rights of participants.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read this information letter and agree that the researcher may use the university surveys of those parents and students that grant consent.

____________________________________  ____________________
Administrator Signature                      Date
(University of Toronto letterhead)

Dear Student:

As you may already know, I am a PhD candidate at the University of Toronto, doing research at your school as part of my dissertation. I am interested in students’ expectations for the future, how they are preparing for their futures, and how the independent school supports their aspirations and creates opportunities. Independent schools have optimal resources, enabling them to provide a rich experience and numerous opportunities for their students.

I have learned a lot by attending classes, assemblies, and so on, but being able to talk to some students one-on-one would be really helpful and insightful. I would like to interview you about your experience at the school.

Should you agree to be interviewed, you may choose to withdraw, without consequence, at any time. The interview will be recorded, but the recording device may be paused or stopped at any time at your request. All students, teachers, and administrators will remain unidentified throughout the research project (from the beginning of the study to the written results).

If you (or your parent(s)) have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact me (jayne.baker@utoronto.ca or [redacted]). You may also contact my dissertation supervisor at the University of Toronto, Dr. Sandy Welsh (416-978-5290 or welsh@chass.utoronto.ca) or the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto (416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca) for information about the rights of participants.

Your signature acknowledges that you have read this letter and have agreed to be interviewed.

____________________________________  __________________
Student Signature                  Date
Appendix C: Interview Schedules

Headmaster, principal, and senior head interview schedules:

General Information:

Could you please briefly summarize or sketch out the admissions process at the school?

Do the majority of the students at the school enrol in early grades, or do they trickle in? Do you see an influx of interest in the school or enrolment at a specific grade level?

Can you tell me a bit about how long you’ve been at the school and what your main duties are?

What are some of the reasons parents tell you they are interested in enrolling their child at the school?

Is part of your job keeping up-to-date on the latest research that pertains to single-gender education? What kind of research most interests you?

Education/Curriculum:

What kind of research has informed the curriculum or overall education at [school name]?

How does the school approach the education of [girls/boys]?

Does the school espouse a particular pedagogy or approach to teaching?

Have you had many students accepted to the school that went on to struggle academically? What happens when students are struggling?

Is there any aspect of the education at [school name] that you try to stress the most (such as community outreach, academics, athletics, etc)?

How important are leadership opportunities, clubs, etc in the school? What role do they play in the students’ education?

Can you tell me a little bit about the community outreach that happens at the school? (i.e.: locales, populations they work with.) How does community outreach fit in with the goals of the school?

How does the curriculum or education more broadly at [school name] compare to that offered at single-gender schools that educate [boys/girls]?

In what ways is the school different than a coeducation school?
School Influence:

What would you say are the benefits of the school to the student?

What kind of impact or influence do you think the school has on students’ lives, such as their life goals, career paths, etc?

What do you believe are the most important ways you prepare your students for their futures?

What are the markers of a successful [school name] graduate?

What is the most rewarding aspect of your position? What is most challenging?
University counsellor interview schedules:

*University counselling office goals/mandate/general*

Can you tell me a bit about the university counselling office? (Such as…
- how many staff members are specifically devoted to university admissions?
- For how long the office has been operating?
- have there been any developments in how big or small the office is, in response to parent/student need, or strategic planning?)

Can you take me through how you go about university counselling?
- (In what grade do you start talking to the students about university?
- Do you do one-on-one counselling? For all students or those who request it?
- Do they have a university information night for parents and students? What kind of information is offered that evening?)

What would you say is the goal of the university counselling office (in terms of what you are trying to accomplish with your students)?

What is most rewarding about your position? What is most challenging?

*Student “Fit”*

What are some of the anxieties and excitements that students have about university?

What are some of the things the students at your school look for in a university?

Is trying to make a good fit between student and university ever difficult or challenging?

What are some of the ways that you help students narrow the number or types of universities that they would like to apply to?

If a student were to be accepted to multiple universities and asked for advice on how to make the decision, what would you tell them? In other words, what would you say are the important criteria for university selection?

What kind of counselling do you offer to students who are considering taking time off after university?

How do you counsel students who aren’t sure about what to major in? Do you have students at this school who aren’t sure about their major?

*Parental Involvement*

How often are parents in contact with you? Under what kinds of circumstances?

Are there parents who become more involved than other parents? (Why do you think that is?)
Have there been times when parental involvement is challenging?

Does this office ever get asked to mediate between parents’ interests and students’ interests? (Are parents and students usually in agreement over what universities they are interested in?)

School/University Connections
What kinds of advantages does your office provide to its students that perhaps are not present in a public school?

How do the students benefit from having the name [school name] as the high school they are applying from?

Under what kind of circumstances have you vouched for a student or made appeals to a university over an admissions decision?

Universities of Interest
I’ve noticed that some universities come to make presentations to the students...
- Do you typically approach these schools to make visits, or do they contact your office to arrange those meetings?
- Are there any universities that you discourage from making visits to the school or in particular that you seek out to make a presentation?

Do any universities have particular kinds of profiles that attract your students? Examples?

Any universities that do not attract your students? What is it about these schools that you think the students might find unattractive?

Under what kinds of circumstances do you have to discourage a student from applying to a particular college or university?

If you were to compare the programs and universities that the students at this school were applying to today to those from 10 years ago, are there any differences or similarities?

How do you counsel those students and parents that are interested in out-of-province or international universities?

What would you say are the hallmarks of a successful university placement?
Student exit interview schedules:

About the school:

In what grade did you start at [school name]?

Why did your parents want to enrol you at [school name]?

What do you think are the benefits of being at an all-[gender] school?

What are the disadvantages?

If you had the choice, would you attend [school name] again?

If you had a child someday, how would you decide whether to send them to a school like [school name]?

Comparing schools:

Are there any differences between students at this school and other independent schools?

Are there any differences between students at independent schools and public or Catholic schools?

Transitioning to higher education:

Are you mostly excited or mostly nervous about leaving [school name]?

When did you know you wanted to go to university?

Where did you apply? What was it about those particular universities that inspired you to apply?

Were there any universities that you knew all along you didn’t want to apply to? What was it about those universities?

What about students who take a year off?

Did you consider a US or overseas university? Do most students consider applying to any of these schools?

Where are you going/where do you want to go? What program did you apply to?

What is your ‘ideal job’?