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Published online: 28 Jul 2021.

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'No fear': privilege and the navigation of hierarchy at an elite boys' school in England

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to contribute to the growing scholarship on elite schooling through an ethnographic study into the distinct micro-practices of the formation and reproduction of privilege taking place within an elite boys' school in England. The article focuses on the significance of the teacher-student hierarchy as a prism through which to view some of the socialisation processes taking place at the school. Ultimately, it shows that the 'flattened' nature of the teacher-student hierarchy results in the students being given the space to learn how to navigate relationships with those in authority without fear or trepidation, thus contributing toward the inculcation of a certain form of embodied privilege or so called 'ease.' Furthermore, it is both the successes as well as the *failures* in the students' attempts to navigate hierarchies that contribute toward the formation and reproduction of privilege in such settings.

Introduction

There has been much recent scholarly attention paid to the propulsive power of the elite school (see Reeves et al. 2017; Friedman and Laurison 2019; Green and Kynaston 2019). Such scholarship has primarily sought to shine a light on the ways in which elite schools contribute to the reproduction of privilege in society (Forbes and Lingard 2015; Howard 2008; Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Khan 2011; Maxwell and Aggleton 2014) as well as the extent to which such schools 'choreograph' a transnational social class (Howard and Maxwell 2021; Kenway and Koh 2013; Kenway et al. 2017; Lillie 2021) of much significance in today's increasingly interconnected world. The above work, however, has not yet sufficiently demonstrated what specific mechanisms *produce* these elite privileges. This article seeks to break new ground through reporting the findings of an ethnographic study into the distinct micro-practices of the formation and reproduction of privilege taking place within Fortune Park School (FPS), an elite boys' school in England at which I currently work as a teacher. Here I highlight the significance of the teacher-student hierarchy as a prism through which the socialisation processes which generate privilege operate. Specifically, I show how the

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teacher-student relationship serves to scaffold the accrual of beneficial forms of interactional embodied privilege among students at elite schools such as FPS.

For the purposes of this article I use Khan's (2016) definition of elites and elite institutions as having disproportionate control over certain academic, social, cultural and economic resources considered of value. In the UK, it is predominantly fee-paying schools that hold enduring elite status including members of the influential Clarendon group (Reeves et al. 2017), and one such school of this kind is the focus of my study. However, and as Khan (2016) points out, it is important to note that 'elite schools are not elite because of their properties or competitiveness, nor are they elite because of who attends. Instead, these institutions exist within a complex web of relations, often highly contingent on the national and even global institutional and cultural arrangements within which they are embedded' (15). As such, the fact that the school being studied is a boys' school should not go unexamined. Indeed, Sparks (2018) has drawn attention to the distinct ways in which privilege as understood in the context of an elite school is gendered, declaring that 'gendered practices enacted within elite schools endorse and sustain hegemonic masculinist culture' (1498). Therefore, it is essential to recognise how multiple advantages intersect to create the specific environment under study (Rollock 2014).

The article begins with a discussion of key ideas relating to embodied forms of privilege as enacted and reproduced in the institutional setting of the elite school, before looking at how the literature has considered the ways in which students navigate and negotiate teacher-student hierarchies. This is followed by a case study overview and an account of the methodologies used, including participant observation as an insider-researcher (Adler and Adler 1987), interviews and peer-led focus groups (Groundwater-Smith 2015; Murray 2006). I then provide an in-depth ethnographic account of *how* students learn to negotiate relationships with their teachers. I aim to consider the students as active agents in the research (Calarco 2018) whilst remaining wary of the impact of institutional structures, class background, parents and families on my findings. The specific focus of this study, however, is on the bearing of the interactions between teacher and student within an elite school context such as that of FPS, and the extent to which the character of these interrelationships contributes toward the formation and reproduction of embodied forms of privilege.

Ultimately, I find that the flattened nature of the teacher-student hierarchy results in the students at FPS being given the space to practise navigating relationships with those in authority without fear or trepidation. Furthermore, it is both the successes as well as the *failures* in their attempts to navigate hierarchies that contribute toward the formation of embodied and inculcated privilege. I argue that such marks of privilege are learned via a messy web of interactions, and are often awkward, as opposed to 'polished,' in the manner in which they are ultimately embodied by students at the school. Nonetheless, the operationalisation of these embodied dispositions has been consistently highlighted as key to the future professional success of elite school alumni both in terms of status and pay (Ashley and Empson 2017; Rivera 2015).

Elite schooling and the formation of privilege

The notion of 'privilege' in the context of elite schooling has seen much recent interrogation in the literature with scholars focusing on the multi-faceted ways in which the concept can be defined, understood and reproduced. One such interpretation is provided by Adam

Howard (2008) in his examination of privilege in four elite schools in the USA. He builds upon Peggy McIntosh's (1989) iteration of the 'invisible knapsack of privilege' as a foundational lens through which to understand the unquestioned dominance of white privilege as an unearned advantage. Howard (2008) seeks to extend McIntosh's definition by shifting the focus away from perceptions of privilege as a commodity to exposing privilege as an *identity* or a sense of self-understanding. Khan (2011) takes this further in his seminal ethnography of an elite boarding school in the USA, where the central argument works with Bourdieusian understandings of capital (Bourdieu 1990; Bourdieu and Passeron 1979) to conceptualise privilege as a learned embodied interactional skill, or a process of becoming, culminating in the 'mark' of *ease* that is (mis)recognised as legitimate. It is this ease, or a particular way of being in the world, that confers the elite students Khan follows with advantages upon leaving the institution and so contributes towards the reproduction of enduring inequalities in American society.

Scholars of elite schools in the UK have come to similar conclusions regarding the power of such schools to contribute toward the inculcation of advantageous dispositions, with particular reference to girls' schools. Maxwell and Aggleton's study of three elite girls' schools (2014) highlights the importance of the family, the school and the self in shaping participants' orientations, resulting in differing forms of privilege manifested through the varied ways in which these spheres overlap. They find that in situations where the expectations of the school and the family are shared, the girls are imbued with a greater sense of 'surety' in themselves and their futures. Forbes and Lingard (2015) report comparable findings in their study of a British girls' fee-paying school's 'institutional habitus,' where the conditions brought about through an alignment between the work of the school and the home result in what the authors term a sense of 'assured optimism' amongst the girls interviewed. This acts as a particular expression of privilege manifested through high levels of confidence regarding future educational and professional success.

Indeed, the students in the studies outlined above are right to feel a sense of confidence in their respective futures, with elite schools proven to have much propulsive power (Green et al. 2018; Green and Kynaston 2019). Rivera's (2015) analysis of the recruitment practices of banking, law and consulting firms in the US digs deeper into this process, showing us how elite reproduction occurs in hiring. She finds that hirers place value on the disposition of 'polish' as a means of measuring 'candidates' personal qualities via class-tinged lenses… typically provid(ing) advantages for job applications from more privileged backgrounds' (182). She draws upon Khan's aforementioned work to characterise 'polish' as consisting of a 'series of delicate balances' in relation to ease, or the ability on the part of the interviewees to appear at ease whilst also putting the interviewer at ease. Recent research carried out into six professional services firms in the UK by Louise Ashley and Laura Empson (2017) similarly demonstrates how concepts of 'polish,' characterised in this case by the firms as 'a high level of confidence; strong communication skills; and a 'professional' presentation with respect to dress and appearance' (215) is valued by recruiters. Thus, highlighting the powerful ways in which embodied forms of privilege contribute to the reproduction of inequalities of access to elite higher educational institutions and professions.

The literature highlighted above provides us with a lens through which to view the role the elite school can play in the formation and reproduction of privilege over time. However, questions remain regarding the *acquisition* of such dispositions as 'ease' or 'polish,' how these may have the potential to be converted into powerful 'symbolic capital' (Bourdieu

2010), professional success and the consequent perpetuation of privilege. Indeed, an in-depth ethnographic account of *how* certain elite schools enable the accrual of valued forms of capital such as 'ease' – within the classroom and more broadly within the elite school space – is still required if we are to understand how particular experiences and credentials are successfully accumulated and transformed into resources that facilitate the extension of privilege.

Navigating hierarchy and negotiated opportunities

There has been some attention paid to the importance of relationships as a contributing factor to the formation and reproduction of privilege within the elite school setting. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009) describes how the students attending the elite boarding school he studies consistently refer to the school as a 'family.' He highlights the importance of bonding rituals in cementing extremely close relationships between members of the school community. However, he places emphasis on the extent to which what he terms 'deep bonding' is far more significant in strengthening relationships between students as opposed to relationships between teacher and student. In contrast, Khan (2011) closely examines the nature of the relationships formed between faculty and students as a means to understand how the navigation of hierarchy contributes towards the inculcation of ease. He depicts the students in his ethnographic study as being masterfully skilled at navigating complex hierarchies between support staff, faculty and themselves to the extent that they are able to successfully obscure the existing hierarchy without ever challenging it. The relationship between faculty and student is subsequently described as *dense*, or a complex web of inter-relationships and interactions that allow for 'both intimacy and respectful distance' (64). The students therefore learn how to navigate and negotiate hierarchies successfully and with the privilege of ease.

However, questions can be posed regarding *how* students learn to navigate these relationships so successfully as well as the extent to which hierarchies within the elite school environment truly remain unchallenged. Indeed, Calarco (2018) provides a different perspective (albeit within a different context) in her detailed ethnographic account of a public primary school in the US. Those students she classifies as middle-class learn to negotiate opportunities for themselves through the *disregard* of hierarchy and direct challenges to authority. She finds that the students in her study who are the most successful at negotiating opportunities do so as an act of resistance where 'middle class advantage is not dependent on compliance with institutional expectations' (187). As such, the students gain advantages through successfully circumnavigating and challenging the rules of the institution. Thus, this article seeks to build upon the findings of the authors above to further interrogate and unpack the ways in which the students at FPS learn to navigate hierarchy, contributing toward the acquisition of such valuable dispositions as 'ease' or 'polish.'

The study

Fortune park school[1] *(FPS), England*

FPS is a highly selective boys' day school located in England. It caters for 1300 students from the age of 11-18. Girls are admitted in the Sixth Form but make up a significant

minority of the total Sixth Form population. The school is considered one of the top schools in the country by the Good Schools Guide. This is my seventh year of teaching at the school (out of a total of twelve years of teaching in the fee-paying schools sector). I started my doctoral research in 2016 and was granted ongoing access to carry out my fieldwork and research (alongside the teaching of my subject).

The overall study is ethnographic in nature, lending itself to an in-depth, empirical analysis of the school in which I work. Therefore, the primary means of data collection has been participant observation. Participant observation serves as a more general term for a number of different techniques that can be used to gather empirical data in the field. However, in this case, I became a 'participant-as observer' (Gold 1958) or a 'complete-member researcher' (Adler and Adler 1987) in the sense that I continued to work as a teacher at the same time as carrying out this research. This provided me with a distinct insider perspective on the practices and processes taking place at the school. My role has continuously changed and evolved throughout the research process depending upon the phenomenon being observed. Indeed, my research was in some situations entirely autoethnographic (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Reed-Danahay 1997) where I was fully involved in the process (teaching a lesson or running an extracurricular club) but in other situations I took on a more peripheral role (when observing other teachers' lessons or extracurricular activities) and in some instances I handed over the reins to the students themselves, asking them to be involved in the research process as peer researchers (Groundwater-Smith 2015; Murray 2006).

The social position from which a person views the world will always shape that person's knowledge (Ray 2018). Certainly, my standpoint is firmly and undeniably that of an insider whilst at the same time I have been granted the parallel opportunity to observe the social life of the school as an outsider, providing scope for unusual critical purchase. Feminist approaches to knowledge production can help to make sense of this positionality with Dorothy Smith (1990) arguing that people who are most engaged with the social worlds under study provide a crucial standpoint for understanding those realities. As such, my fieldwork very much aims to pursue a form of situated knowledge production (Harraway 1988) ensuring that I account for my own position within the research as well as the positions of those I am studying (my colleagues and the students that I teach). I seek to make claims that will further our sociological understanding of the social world of FPS, whilst at the same time situating myself firmly within these claims and acknowledging their resultant partiality. What follows in this article is data that stems from my own fieldnotes, and so my experiences and thoughts feature heavily throughout the writing. In fact, there is no escaping that I am firmly situated within this data, the data is borne out of insider status, my experiences of the students I teach, my colleagues and interactions with parents. However, is it this insider status coupled with sociological training and over twelve years of teaching experience in the fee-paying schools sector in England that I believe provides a unique and important perspective on the mechanisms of the formation and reproduction of privilege taking place in such schools.

There are a number of ethical considerations that need to be taken into account in relation to this project, not least due to my status as an employee of the school. An element of particular concern to me was and remains the endangering of pre-existing relationships with colleagues and students as a result of my research. This could have detrimental impacts on the wellbeing of those involved in the research and subsequently influence the data

collection process. In order to mitigate against this, I ensured that all members of staff (as well as students involved in the research) were made fully aware of the objectives and nature of the PhD. All parents, staff and students were informed of the commencement of my doctoral research (either via letter, assemblies or a staff briefing). I then proceeded to spend as much time as possible carrying out participant observation, of lessons (including my own), extracurricular activities and interactions between students and between students and staff (and where possible between parents, students and staff). As part of the participant observation process, I have carried out semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a selection of 42 students and alumni. These interviews were recorded and transcribed before being thematically coded using Nvivo 12. I also conducted informal interviews with 16 members of the wider school community including parents, members of staff and the Senior Management Team (SMT). I did not formally record and transcribe these informal interviews, as they tended to take place on an ad hoc basis but instead included a summary of the themes of the interview in my fieldnotes for that day.

The notion of a flattened hierarchy between teacher and student at FPS

The Head of Science climbs up on to the podium to lead the morning's assembly, she is wearing the typical uniform of a science teacher in a practical lesson; a white lab coat and goggles. In front of her is a curious set up of glasses, funnels and jugs full of mysterious clear liquids. 1000 pairs of eyes stare at her in expectant silence. She starts the assembly by setting the scene of a staff party to which she has had the privilege of being invited. The party is being hosted by one of the Deputy Heads, who happens to be on hand and wearing a similar get up of lab coat and goggles to the Head of Science, this is all the more interesting for everyone watching as it is rare to see an English teacher dressed head to toe in science attire. The Head of Science proceeds to introduce five members of staff as they arrive at the 'party' (or on stage), these five members of staff happen to be the Heads of House and so are primarily responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of the students at the school. As each member of staff enters the scene, he or she asks for their favourite drink which the Deputy Head, in character as the host of the party, pours from a jug of murky colourless liquid into the receiving cup. The first drink to be requested is apple juice, and as the Deputy Head pours, the liquid turns to the colour of apple juice, and the audience gasps out loud at the transformation (with some humour). This continues each time a new member of staff enters the 'party' and requests a different drink-grape juice, then lime juice, then cherryade, which makes everyone in the audience laugh, especially the teachers. The drinks change colour each time to the fascination of the audience, who are sitting bolt upright in their chairs, enthralled, like meercats trying to get a closer look at the experiment taking place on stage. This is one of the few assemblies I have seen where the audience are fully engaged with the content at all times, both students and teachers alike.

This assembly reflects the relaxed nature which characterises the teacher-student relationship at the school. Teachers regularly send themselves up in assembly or other similar public events. They also take the opportunity to share stories about their life experiences to support a key message that they might wish to impart to students. As such, FPS prides itself on the quality of the relationships between the students and the staff body, which are consistently described by members of the school community as relaxed, encouraging and cooperative. This is underpinned by the fact that parents *choose* to send their child to FPS,

they are already aware of the so-called 'culture' of the school and broadly in agreement with the approach it takes to student-teacher relationships and discipline. In other words, the family understands and is in agreement with the aims of the school, both in terms of means and ends, (Bernstein 1975) thus reinforcing an environment in which students and teachers are working together toward a common goal, with interactions between one and the other helping to support that goal.

It is predominantly in the Sixth Form where the students describe in detail how they feel supported by their teachers through this system of informality and cooperation. Andrew, now in his third year at Cambridge University, talks about how he valued feeling able to approach his teachers for support throughout the university application process. He emphasises the extent to which he felt comfortable turning to teachers for help as a result of relationships built up over time at the school:

> I think being able to turn to teachers for extracurricular support more generally, so you[2] helping us with debating, obviously, you never actually taught me, so that's a relationship you develop through something slightly different. But then also, I guess, just through having developed that relationship and relationships with other teachers I felt like I could turn to teachers and ask them for extra interviews, mock interviews for Oxbridge applications and things like that, to read through my personal statement. To approach them for help more generally, which wasn't necessarily part of their remit as a teacher. It wasn't their responsibility to read my personal statement but they were always very happy to.

Molly, a young woman who joined the school in the Sixth Form on a bursary, compares the nature of the student-teacher relationships with those at her old school (a state school in nearby). She is currently in her first year at Yale, having won a scholarship to study in the USA. Her feeling of being on more of an equal footing with her teachers was a view that was common among the majority of my respondents. She even goes as far as to state that there is 'no fear' of the teachers, and that there is a mutual respect between teacher and student that did not exist in her previous school.

> Interviewer[3] (IV): What about relationships with teachers here compared to your old school? Are they different in any way, or similar?

> Molly: Yes, they're definitely different. I think that this may just be FPS because I do feel that FPS is such a kind of close-knitted school. But still, the relationship with teachers is something which I quite like. Because in my old school, especially the senior leadership team, you're kind of taught to fear them in a way. They're very… You don't get as much contact with them. They're seen as kind of scary people around the school. Whereas here, everybody's close with the teachers even senior members. You're not on a lower pad. You're not on lower footing to them. Even as a student, you're still able to kind of talk to them and come up to them. Or even just be friendly with them. I'd say there's still respect at my old school for the teachers, but here there's respect and a kind of appreciation for each other. I don't know. There's no fear here with the teachers.

Despite being embedded within an environment of what might be described as nascent elite masculinity (Sparks 2018). Molly clearly articulates how she feels she has benefitted from the relaxed nature of that environment, to the extent that she goes on to be accepted at an elite American university. This is a pattern I see replicated among a significant majority of the Sixth Form girls I observe and interview, who repeatedly comment positively on the informal nature of the relationships between teacher and student at FPS in comparison to their previous schools.

Elliot, who has since graduated from Oxford with a starred first, also highlights how the relationship becomes increasingly more relaxed in the Sixth Form, where he emphasises the mutual questioning between teacher and student that for him characterises the teacher-student relationship at the school:

> Definitely in the senior school, at age 12, you can immediately go to a teacher and talk to them. They treat you as someone who has ideas and has an opinion. It's not as if you have no knowledge or no intuition about the subject being taught. So, they'll ask you questions, and you can respond and ask the teacher questions. It's not so much the power, in a relationship, but the dynamic is more like the student can get more involved and talk to the teacher in a way that then, in later life… You never really say to a teacher, you're wrong, because you're probably a bit too polite to do that. But there's some level where you're like, well, I disagree, or, would you have another look at this?

All of the students interviewed above, alongside the majority of those interviewed in total, both male and female, stated clearly how much they value and appreciate the nature of the relationships they have forged with their teachers, a relationship they mostly describe as supportive and encouraging. To the extent that most do not even view their teachers as authority figures in the traditional sense. It is therefore the case that in the FPS context, the relationships forged are perceived by students as being 'friendly' and 'without fear.' Present is what I define as a perceived 'flat' hierarchy on the part of the students, where they do not feel that they are treated or should behave as if they are on a 'lower footing' to those in positions of authority. They focus instead on the extent to which they feel they can interact as equals with their teachers, and ask for help and support accordingly both within as well as outside of lessons.

Furthermore, students can (and do) use this sense of a flattened relationship to their advantage- and attempt to negotiate opportunities in ways that directly challenge notions of hierarchy and authority (Calarco 2018). They use the space afforded by the relaxed relationships outlined above, to *practise* interacting with those in positions of authority. And they are able to do so without trepidation. I argue that it is the nature of this process, as well as the very experience of challenging notions of authority that contributes toward equipping these students with a sense that they are entitled to the time and resources of their teachers and professors (see Jack 2019). Therefore, in this next section I will show how, alongside the clever obscuration and yet general acceptance of hierarchy (Khan 2011), it is also the attempted challenges to authority itself that are key to the development of the embodied interactional knowledge cultivated by the students at FPS.

Successes and failures

Part of my job at the school involves accompanying a group of students to a weekend-long debating conference hosted by a similarly elite school elsewhere in the country. On the way back from the conference I find myself sitting in front of two Sixth Form students (Matthew and Matilda) who are animatedly discussing the events of the weekend. The conversation turns from debating to the Extended Project Qualification[4] (EPQ) and Matthew starts to boast to Matilda about how he managed to get a place on the EPQ despite being turned down to begin with. He defines this process as 'applying pressure at both ends' and goes on to describe in great detail to Matilda how he firstly attempted what he calls the 'bottom up approach' by making an application through the expected due process (an online application

form submitted to the teacher in charge of the EPQ). As Matthew had expected, this strategy did not work and his application was quickly refused due to the restriction on any student who is already doing too many subjects. Matthew proudly asserts to Matilda that this was certainly the case for him, as he studies four A-levels plus an AS in Further Maths, so well beyond the expectations of the school. He then goes on to describe how he successfully decided to apply what he calls 'pressure from above' by going to speak with his Chemistry teacher (Mr Flack) who also happens to be the Head of Sixth Form. Matthew managed to persuade Mr Flack to put in a good word with the teacher in charge as he had now missed the deadline to apply. A tactic that was ultimately successful. He finished his story by emphasising the skill of 'applying pressure' on those in charge through the use of his contact with a teacher in possession of more power within the school.

The above demonstrates how Matthew has clearly learned how to 'play the game' or the EPQ application system in this particular case. He proudly outlines to Matilda how he successfully manipulated different relationships with his teachers in order to negotiate a specific opportunity for himself. He is fully aware of the fact that his relationship with the Head of Sixth Form (also an Assistant Head) would play in his favour, in that to get this particular teacher on side would mean that deadlines would become more flexible, thus reflecting his awareness of the hierarchies within the school system and thus which teachers are best to have in your corner. Here we can again identify parallels with the findings of Calarco (2018) whereby a student has negotiated an opportunity for himself through successfully circumnavigating a specific set of rules and deadlines through his relationship with a senior teacher who is able to overrule these rules and deadlines. What is interesting is that he feels *empowered* or emboldened to do so, thus securing his place on a programme that would not have been available to him had he not felt able to 'apply pressure' on his teachers.

At FPS I observe and experience further frequent manifestations of the students 'applying pressure' on their teachers in such a way as to negotiate their way to opportunities. However, their attempts are often not as successful as that of Matthew's. Nick, one of my own Sixth Form students, attempted to apply similar 'pressure from above' during a lesson that took place on the day after the students had received their most recent reports. Just as I was about to start, the Head of Department (HoD) entered the room to collect something from the printer (lessons in this room are often disrupted by teachers and students needing to print or collect printing). She also happens to be the teacher with whom I share this particular class and thus the teaching of Nick. Despite it being very obvious that the lesson had begun, Nick grasped the opportunity to interrogate the HoD, as he was extremely angry with her for having awarded him a grade C in his most recent report card home. This is a grade that he did not believe was a fair reflection of his performance in the subject. A conversation ensued (eating in to valuable class time) in which Nick clearly comes across as being visibly sulky with the HoD, almost as if he was addressing his parent rather than a teacher in a distinct position of authority with the power to assign him grades. He quickly realised that he was not getting anywhere with this approach, and changed tack, turning on the charm before attempting to negotiate his way to a higher grade, culminating in the declaration that he would be happy to spend a full week in detention if the HoD would be willing to raise his grade to a grade B. The HoD was visibly amused by this request, but also somewhat taken aback by having been accosted whilst simply attempting to retrieve something from a printer. However, rather than disciplining Nick, she instead asks him to come and speak

with her about it in more detail later in the day, leaving me to finally get on with making a start to the lesson.

Despite Nick being *unsuccessful* in his attempt to negotiate a better outcome for himself in this particular instance, the very fact that he attempted to do so in the first place again highlights the perceived nature of the student-teacher relationship at FPS as described and understood by the students themselves. Nick felt emboldened enough to jump on the opportunity of the Head of Department entering the room to air his grievances and thus make it clear that he was unhappy with the grade awarded by his teacher, he even goes so far as to attempt to negotiate his way out of the situation by offering to compromise and to carry out a full week in detention. This example is just one of many similar occurrences I both experience and witness over the course of an average school day and is demonstrative of the manner in which students can use the space afforded by the flexible environment in place at the school to practise interacting with those in positions of authority. They are able to do so without fear of substantial repercussions (most of the time) and thus learn how to approach those in positions of authority without trepidation.

David, his name engraved in gold letters on the wall in the dining hall as an ex-Head Boy of the school, is now in his third year at Cambridge university after achieving a string of excellent academic results throughout his time at FPS. His journey from elite school to elite higher education institution to potential elite profession (he has harboured ambition to become a doctor for as long as he can remember) represents a textbook example of the pathway to success that can be accrued by students at the school. He also provides a textbook illustration of a typical way in which the flexible environment in place at the school can be used to challenge authority. In his final year at FPS, David missed lessons to take his driving test. He fundamentally misjudged his relationship with me, his form tutor, as he told his teachers and the Head of Sixth Form that I had given him permission to do so, thereby attempting to exploit the nature of my relationship with him which he had misread as being over-familial. This didn't end well for him as he quickly realised that I would not defend him- and instead he received a detention and a phone call home. He was contrite and apologetic but ultimately remorse does not undo the fact that in this case the Head Boy of the school felt entitled to use the system to attempt to negotiate an advantage for himself, albeit unsuccessfully in this case. An interview with him once he had left the school and started at university demonstrates how retrospect enabled him to recognise this trait in himself:

> David (D): In some ways, the first 50% was the same in that your teachers, your boss, everything in life, is not necessarily there to oppress you but you should know how to approach people who might be considered intimidating. But also, at the same time, the difference was that they were still authority figures and at school perhaps the boundary got a bit blurred.
>
> IV: That's interesting. To the point where some students don't know where the line is?
>
> D: Well, that's the thing. Nowhere else really do you get such scope to be quite so, let me put this diplomatically…Precocious? Yes, I'm sure I was guilty of it and I'm sure most people at the school were guilty of basically thinking they are above their low station because we are literally kids and we're not authority figures ourselves.

Here, David acknowledges how the nature of the student-teacher relationship at FPS helped him to approach those that might appear intimidating, yet he also recognises how the blurring of this boundary, or a misreading of the hierarchy on his behalf could lead to

a misjudgement of how best to approach those in positions of power and authority, to the extent that this could be done in a manner deemed as bordering on arrogance. Nonetheless, these missteps ultimately did not affect his overall trajectory, and despite failures, his pathway to so-called success has not been affected. Thus, I argue that the opportunities provided in relation to being able to *practise* interacting with those in authority, and thus make mistakes or fail, have contributed toward furnishing him with a form of embodied capital or the 'polish' that he himself recognises as being crucial in enabling his successful integration into an elite higher education institution. An institution whose educational systems are shown in the literature to benefit those from similar backgrounds to David both in terms of gender and class (Gaston and Duschinsky 2020).

However, it is definitely not the case that all students feel at ease applying pressure on their teachers in this way, and there are a significant minority who would not dream of attempting to question the authority of the teacher. Indeed, for those students who don't feel as comfortable interacting with their teachers, this process can be very difficult and it often means that the students who benefit most from this particular system are those that have the voice and drive to negotiate for what they want (Ball 2002; Ball et al. 1996; Reay, Crozier, and James 2011). This is likely to involve inequalities of class, gender and race which intersect to support a predominantly elite, white and male environment which is key to understanding how and why certain students feel more comfortable challenging authority than others. Thus, those students who can be considered multiply advantaged, are acting within a distinct framework of structural advantage where their privilege is 'enjoyed rather than specifically acknowledged' (Hatchell 2004, 100). Furthermore, it is important to note the extent to which such dispositions as 'ease' or 'polish' are in themselves racialised as a form of historically white property (Gaztambide-Fernández and Angod 2019), so helping to explain their value in wider society. In consequence, it will always be harder for those students who are not multiply advantaged to benefit from the specific 'field of production' (Bourdieu 1993) in place at FPS.

Beyond school

My conversations with alumni further attest to the ways in which the nature of the student-teacher relationship at FPS can help support the accrual of valued forms of embodied and interactional capital that prove beneficial when entering elite higher education institutions. Martin, now in his third year at University College London, deputised for David as Head Boy whilst at school. This role involved managing a team of 15 prefects all of whom have been selected by both their peers and their teachers for the role. Being a member of the school team of prefects is highly coveted, and alongside a substantial time commitment and extra responsibility, comes with a variety of privileges, including a breakfast meeting with the Deputy Head every week to discuss responsibilities for the week ahead. A member of the team of prefects will therefore experience an even more enhanced version of the flattened teacher-student hierarchy, in the sense that they will end up spending more time with the Senior Leadership Team than other students in their year group. In the extract below, Martin tells me how his experience has provided him with skills and experience that he was able to readily transfer in his favour upon reaching university.

IV: What have you taken from that? So, having breakfast with the Headmaster and the Deputy Head?

Martin: Yes, it sounds a bit vague, not people skills, but communicative skills. I didn't notice at the time but now that I'm at uni, where the onus is on you to approach professors or teachers and ask them questions. I see friends who maybe haven't had that same experience as me at FPS, who seem to be comparatively a lot more passive about approaching people, in terms of teachers and professors. I can maybe envisage how having had this relationship with my teachers from a young age and feeling comfortable to talk to them about, not just my academic concerns, but social concerns as well.

How that aided my ability at university as well to talk to my seniors and talk to my professors with the ease, that I don't think comes as naturally to a lot of my friends. Obviously, we have the office hours system, where you have to book the ten minutes or whatever, but I have friends who have never seen their advisor for the last two years. Whereas I make sure to book every two weeks to let them know how I am doing. Just because I was in the habit at FPS.

Martin clearly outlines how he feels he has benefitted from the teacher-student relationship he experienced at school to the extent that now he has reached university, he is able to see how these experiences have advantaged him relative to others. For Martin, it is obvious that the advisors and professors at university should fulfil a similar role to that of his teachers at FPS and so he makes a point of using the procedures in place to carry through these relationships in a similar vein, taking the initiative to check in with his advisor every two weeks to make sure she/he knows how he is doing. He is also fully aware of how this puts him in a privileged position and thus contributes to the potential for him to succeed in a university environment.

An interview with David (whom we met earlier) once he had started at Cambridge makes a similar case for how the flattened nature of the teacher-student hierarchy at FPS can contribute toward potential advantages at university:

Yes, there's that split between… On the one hand you have the person who is, more than anyone else I think, capable of holding a conversation with an authority figure without getting stressed. I think, at least at FPS, that was reasonably common that, partly because of the relaxed environment, nobody ever was intimidated by authority figures.

Again, now he is at university David clearly recognises how his ability to 'hold a conversation with an authority figure without getting stressed' has been advantageous, particularly within such an elite setting as a college formal dinner. David, as Head Boy, would have spent many a breakfast meeting with the Headmaster and Deputy Head throughout his time at FPS. Thus, we can again see the ways in which FPS gives students opportunities to practise elite interactions within a predominantly elite, white and male space, furnishing them with a set of experiences that enables them to feel comfortable in subsequent spaces and places of privilege. To the extent that they are able to recognise this trait in themselves once they are given the opportunity to meet others whom may not have benefitted from access to the same opportunities.

I recognise that these alumni were well aware of the objectives of the project and thus thinking about my questions through a particular lens which may have affected their answers to the questions posed, particularly in relation to their own privilege and accumulated advantage. Still, all of the alumni interviewed commented in some way on the advantages of their social position over others. Thus, recognising their own privilege after being exposed to those

who have not had similar opportunities. Whether or not my questions primed them to think in a certain way, these findings are notable regarding the extent to which the experiences forged in school help to inform their sense of belonging in elite higher education institutions in relation to those who had not benefited from similar opportunities. Furthermore, this research has undeniably itself benefited from the notion of flattened hierarchy as constructed by students, in the sense that the data I have been able to obtain through interviews and informal conversations with students has been extremely rich. As with any piece of research, there will be an inherent power dynamic at play between the research and the researched (Ali 2006; Probst 2015) however I believe that the erosion of my authority in this instance itself testifies to my arguments, by providing students with yet another opportunity to practise interacting with someone in a potential position of authority or power, in this case someone acting as both their teacher *and* as a doctoral researcher.

Conclusion

There are no doubt a number of influencing factors that work together to produce an environment in which FPS students feel like a 'fish in water,' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) at the school and thus contribute toward the build-up of a form of interactional embodied knowledge that is so valued by elite institutions. This article has unpicked the nature of the teacher-student relationship at an elite boys' school so as to illustrate the ways in which daily interactions between teacher and pupil scaffold the formation and reproduction of privilege at such schools. This is ultimately a relationship where the inherent hierarchy is perceived by students as relatively flat, to the extent that they describe their relationships with their teachers as 'friendly,' 'relaxed' and 'supportive.' The students then use the space afforded by this flattened hierarchy to *practise* interacting with those in positions of authority.

I have also shown that the elite students at FPS don't always navigate these relationships as smoothly or successfully as suggested in prior work (Khan 2011). Instead my findings show that challenges to the hierarchy are commonplace and in fact characterise the many ways in which the students interact with their teachers at the school on a daily basis. Furthermore, it is not just through the successful negotiation of these challenges that advantages are gained (Calarco 2018), it is also through the repeated *practise* of such (often unsuccessful) challenges, so contributing toward the formation and reproduction of an embodied form or privilege or 'ease' that is rarely masterful or 'polished' in its presentation, and is instead predicated on a web of interactions characterised by both successes and failures on the part of the student, dependent on the ability to feel comfortable making challenges in the first place.

Furthermore, and as my conversations and interviews with alumni suggest, a tendency to challenge notions of authority or fail in their attempts to negotiate the hierarchy does not seem to impact upon these students' future success, particularly if they are multiply advantaged in relation to class, gender and race. If anything, the embodied sense of ease or confidence that students feel in the company of those in positions of authority is valued by elite institutions and recruiters as a form of 'polish' that sets them apart from others who do not embody such ease (Ashley and Empson 2017; Friedman and Laurison 2019; Rivera 2015). Therefore, it is not just notions of 'polish' or 'ease' that are mis(recognised), but also the means by which such dispositions are inculcated, which are indeed far from polished, and instead premised upon an institutional context in which students learn how to approach those in positions of authority without fear.

Notes

1. The school under study has been anonymised, any reference to specific individuals are pseudonyms.
2. The 'you' in this extract is in reference to the author of this article.
3. The interviewer throughout this and subsequent extracts is the author of this article.
4. The EPQ is considered to be the equivalent of half an A-level. It allows the student to carry out a research project on a topic of their choice with teacher support. The opportunity to carry out an EPQ at FPS is not open to all students, instead they must apply to be accepted onto the programme.

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