Sociology

'A Home Away from Home': Space, Ritual and Performance at an Elite Boys' School in England

Emma Taylor [iD]
London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

Abstract

This article advances ethnographic understandings of the distinctive micro-practices of the formation of elites taking place within Fortune Park School, a private boys' school in England. It focuses primarily on two related axes of the elite school environment; the layout, use and presentation of the school's physical space, and an analysis of school ritual. I argue that the veneer of formality presented by the school is a 'frontstage' performance, disguising a network of interactions or 'backstage' performances that are characterised by a sense of informality or *ease*. Therefore, I show that the rituals taking place within the school buildings reflect a constant tension between formal and informal states of being. Learning to navigate this tension becomes part of the everyday experience of a Fortune Park School student, contributing towards the acquisition of valued forms of embodied capital that have been demonstrated as advantageous for those with it in their possession.

Introduction

Multiple studies show the continuing dominance of the privately educated in positions of influence in the UK (Green and Kynaston, 2019; The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission, 2019). Furthermore, striking research by Reeves et al. (2017) has clearly highlighted the stubbornly propulsive power of a group of nine elite schools[1] where attendance is 94 times more likely to get you an entry in *Who's Who* than if you were to have attended any other type of school. Despite the ongoing nature of this stark inequality in the British education system, sociological scholarship has not yet sufficiently

Corresponding author:
Emma Taylor, London School of Economics and Political Science, Houghton Street, WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: emma.s.taylor@kcl.ac.uk

addressed what specific mechanisms *form* the elite privileges that propel elite students in the UK into positions of power. This article therefore advances ethnographic understandings of the distinctive micro-practices that contribute towards the inculcation of elite dispositions within Fortune Park School (FPS),[2] an independent boys' school in England where I worked as a secondary school teacher for over nine years. Drawing on the work of Goffman (1990), I argue that the veneer of formality presented by the school in relation to its physical space and the manifestation of school rituals is a 'frontstage' *performance*, disguising a messy network of interactions or 'backstage' performances that are characterised by a sense of informality or the experience of 'home away from home'. Thus, the repeated process and practice of navigating the spaces and procedures of elite environments helps contribute towards the acquisition of a valued form of cultural capital among the students, enabling a certain 'ease' that has been shown to be distinct to those with privilege (Khan, 2011).

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, a category into which FPS, with its extensive resources and ability to propel students into elite higher education institutions and professions, clearly falls. This article focuses on two related axes of this resource-rich elite school environment; the layout, use and presentation of the school's physical space, and an analysis of school ritual. I show how students are being exposed to multiple different meanings and interpretations of space and rituals that require navigation. In other words, it is through repeated forms of performativity (Butler, 2006) taking place upon and within a given architectural front (and back) stage (Goffman, 1990) that results in the attachment of meaning and belonging to a specific place or locality (Fortier, 1999). Therefore, I show that the rituals taking place within the school buildings reflect a constant tension between formal and informal states of being. Learning to navigate this tension becomes a part of the everyday experience of an FPS student.

The above serves to provide an analytical framework through which to underline the oscillation between formal and informal taking place across time and space within the boundaries of the school as well as through interactions within and between school space and school rituals. Both operate in tandem to create a world in which the members of the institution are navigating their way through unclear terrain both physically and institutionally. But it is exactly the repeated process and *practise* of this navigation that helps contribute towards the acquisition of a valuable form of embodied cultural capital that has repeatedly been demonstrated as advantageous for those with it in their possession (see Ashley and Empson, 2017; Friedman and Laurison, 2019; Howard, 2008; Khan, 2011; Rivera, 2015).

Privilege and Elite Schools

There has been a recent burgeoning of sociological interest in the elite school, as a means through which to gain a better understanding of the causes of inequality. As such, there is now a rich body of qualitative work that focuses on the notion of 'privilege' in the context of elite schooling, particularly in the USA (see Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Howard, 2008; Khan, 2011) with authors striving to refocus understandings of privilege

as an *identity* so as to show the different means and ways through which 'having access to economic resources alone does not give a person elite status' (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009: 11). Khan (2011) expands on this framework in his ethnographic account of St Paul's boarding school, where he demonstrates in vivid detail how privilege can be conceptualised as a sense of embodied 'ease' or a sense of comfort across and within a wide range of contexts that is misrecognised as legitimate or natural, thus enabling the active reproduction of inequality within North American society. In other words, and as Khan (2011: 84) points out 'what appears a natural, simple quality is actually learned through repeated experiences in elite institutions'. Further scholarship has shown how such dispositions, similarly characterised in the literature as 'polish' can be considered of value in the recruitment practices of elite professions (Rivera, 2015) so highlighting the powerful ways in which embodied forms of privilege contribute to the reproduction of inequalities of access to elite higher educational institutions and careers.

Studies in the UK have come to similar conclusions regarding the reproductive power of certain dispositions acquired through elite schooling such as 'assured optimism' (Forbes and Lingard, 2015) and 'surety' (Maxwell and Aggleton, 2014) with each of these studies emphasising the extent to which students educated at such schools are in the fortunate position of feeling a sense of optimism regarding their futures. They illustrate how this feeling of optimism is set within a context in which there is a particular sense of alignment between the goals of the school and the home, as well as a context through which elite schools contribute towards the 'choreography' of a transnational or cosmopolitan social class (Howard and Maxwell, 2020; Kenway and Koh, 2013; Lillie, 2021), thus enabling a better understanding of how the global political economy and its relationship to power plays a role in elite formation and reproduction.

However, and despite the important gains made in relation to understanding the ways and means through which elite schools can support the reproduction of privilege (and therefore inequality on different scales), there is still more work to be done to better understand exactly *how* these dispositions are inculcated through the micro-practices taking place within such schools in the UK, whose reproductive and propulsive power is so significant and persistent. As such, this article seeks to shine a light on the specific ways in which the mechanisms of school rituals and the architectural spaces in which they take place, can provide us with a better understanding of the micro-practices that contribute towards the formation of valued forms of embodied capital such as 'ease' and 'polish' described earlier.

Habitus, Space, Ritual and Performance

A useful lens through which to view the social world of the school, and so help frame this work is Bourdieu's conceptualisation of 'habitus,' or a system of internalised structures, dispositions, perceptions and conceptions that characterise all members of the same group or class. In addition, Bourdieu's (1986) analysis of the relationship between class privilege, habitus and 'forms of capital' provide further foundation for understanding the processes at work here. He states that social systems explicitly recognise practices that allow for economic exchange as legitimate, where economic capital is regarded as the

direct means through which wealth is accumulated and transmitted. However, this hides the subtler practices and processes taking place below the surface, where cultural and social capital can enable indirect access to privilege and wealth – access that, as Khan (2011) also argues is repeatedly misrecognised and therefore permitted without challenge. It is the habitus as mediator between structure and agency, operating within the 'field' that is the educational establishment, that allows for this hidden process of cultural reproduction to occur.

The concept of habitus is ripe for further theoretical exploration and extension, as exemplified through work by Reay et al. (2010: 108), which draws upon the notion of the *institutional habitus* as a 'complex amalgam of agency and structure and could be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation', enabling a better understanding of the multitude of ways in which the enduring institutional characteristics of an educational establishment influence the lives of those operating within it (Horvat and Antonio, 1999). Taken together with Bernstein's (1975) conceptualisation of the 'expressive order', or the morally binding rituals that 'relate the individual . . . to a social order, to heighten respect for that order' (1975: 55) we are provided with tools through which to consider how the specific and historic institutional characteristics of school ritual can create the conditions for the micro-practices that play a role in the reproduction of elite dispositions to take place.

For the purposes of this article, I use Quantz's (2011: 36) definition of ritual as 'that aspect of action that is formalised, symbolic, performance'. However, I extend Quantz's definition by adding reference to the importance of physical space in relation to *repeated performances*. There has been some scholarship on the importance of ritual in relation to schooling (see Bernstein, 1975; McCloskey, 2014; McLaren, 1993; Quantz, 2011) drawing upon the work of eminent 'ritologists' from the field of anthropology (Douglas, 1991; Turner, 1969). Yet there has been little contemporary work that delves further into the role of ritual within the spaces of elite schools, despite Bourdieu's (1977, 1996) extensive writing on the importance of rites of passage and ritual in contributing towards elite formation and reproduction.

This article therefore draws extensively upon Goffman's (1990) dramaturgical theory, to consider Bourdieusian understandings of *how* certain advantageous dispositions are inculcated within elite schools with specific reference to the performance of elite school rituals and the spaces within which they take place. Indeed, Goffman conceptualises social life as a performance that changes dependent on whether or not the performers find themselves front or backstage. A frontstage performance is likely to present an 'idealised view of a situation' (Goffman, 1990: 44), where 'some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects, which might discredit the fostered impression are suppressed' (1990: 114). The suppressed activity is that which can be performed backstage where the performers are able to feel more comfortable and able to express themselves more freely. Thus, the social life of the school is mediated by the space or place within which it occurs as well as *who* is present to watch the performance occur. Here, I present the rich data I have been able to capture through an indepth ethnographic study of rituals and the spaces within which they take place at FPS, enabling a close account of how such practices contribute to the inculcation of valued

embodied dispositions such as 'ease' and 'polish', affected by a distinctive institutional habitus characterised by messy and complex interactions.

Furthermore, it is of vital importance to note the significance of history in relation to the campuses of elite schools. Angod and Gaztambide-Fernández (2019) have written at great length about the relationship between concepts of eliteness and whiteness. They consider their analysis of elite schooling through the lens of coloniality, accusing those studying elite schools of neglecting to pay attention to the ongoing impact of colonialism as a contributing factor to the production of elites and elite dispositions. Hence, an immersive analysis of the school's built environment and the practices taking place within it must be adopted and considered with this historical context in mind. As Ahmet (2020: 679) points out, engaging with the physical space of an elite educational institution 'is to be reminded of the power space has to make one feel "inside" or "outside"' and therefore any sense of belonging and respect that FPS students have with and for the school might be considered exclusive to those for whom these spaces and rituals have been designed in the first place.

Methods

This article is based upon data that forms part of wider ethnographic research into elite formation at FPS, a highly selective, fee-paying[3] boys' day school located in England where I worked as a secondary school teacher throughout the data collection process (and for a total period of close to a decade). It caters for 1300 students from the age of 11–18 (with a linked junior school). Girls are admitted in the sixth form but make up a minority of the total sixth form population.

This study, first and foremost, is an ethnographic analysis of FPS. Therefore, the primary means of data collection was as a 'complete-member researcher' (Adler and Adler, 1994) in that I continued to work as a teacher at the school at the same time as undertaking the fieldwork process. This provided me with a distinct insider perspective on the practices taking place, which I developed over a period of prolonged fieldwork, in this case 18 months, with continued access to the field for a further four years, resulting in the production of a 'richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience' (O'Reilly, 2004: 3). In addition to providing a rich account of social life, ethnography helps to overcome what Jerolmack and Khan (2014) call the 'attitudinal fallacy' or the 'methodological implications of the fact that what people say is often a poor predictor of what they do' (2014: 178). Therefore, it is ethnography's ability to situate accounts and actions in an *interactive* context (Jerolmack and Khan, 2014) that is most of use to this article.

There has been recent and significant critique of research into elite education studies for being methodologically conservative and for falling back on the repetition of familiar methodological stories (Howard and Kenway, 2015; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2015). Howard and Kenway (2015), in particular, highlight the overreliance of studies such as this on ethnographic methods including interviews. They call for these methods to be 'enriched' and state that 'the benefits and challenges of less conventional approaches to research[ing] elites and elite education need to be more fully considered' (Howard and Kenway, 2015: 1010). Yet, and as Jerolmack and Khan (2014) argue, ethnography is a

powerful tool for uncovering and explaining action or processes of making and becoming, it enables the researcher to discover practices that would not necessarily be acknowledged by the participants themselves in interviews. Thus, despite its limitations, I decided to use this traditional, trusted method as the primary means of data collection for this project. However, I addressed some of the issues highlighted by Howard and Kenway through purposefully disrupting the complex power dynamics of the research via the means of the inclusion of peer-led focus groups as a method of data collection. As such, I aim to 'develop reciprocity with research subjects and to . . . deconstruct [my] authority in the research and/or writing process' (Pillow, 2003: 179).

This study included extensive semi-structured interviews and peer-led focus groups with a selection of 42 students and alumni. Students and focus group participants were recruited purposively via networks I already had in place at the school, and I found I gathered the richest data from those with whom I had a prior relationship either as their subject teacher or form-tutor. After transcription, the data were thematically coded using Nvivo 12, using what O'Reilly (2004: 177) refers to as an iterative-inductive approach to analysis where the research is thought of as 'progressing not in a linear way but in a spiral, where you are moving forward from idea to theory to design to data collection to findings, analysis and back to theory'. My first step was to use open coding as a means of sorting through the data, and to create an initial categorisation of the data. I then created sub-codes to drill deeper into the patterns that were emerging through this process, while at the same time having the advantage of being able to easily revisit my field site to update the data or ask further questions of my research participants. For example, I was able to add further layered descriptions of the same ritualised events taking place at the school on different days and at different times.

Ethics

Ethical guidelines for research are traditionally structured in such a way as to protect those participating in the research. The general assumption is that the researcher will hold a certain amount of power over the research subjects and that this should be taken into account throughout the research design and implementation process. This, however, is not necessarily the case when carrying out research on elites, where the power relations between researcher and researched can be disrupted (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2015; Maxwell and Aggleton, 2015). In response to this disruption of the traditional dynamics of power, Gaztambide-Fernández (2015) proposes that in the name of social justice, those researching elites should adopt an un/ethical position – whereby ethical frameworks should become flexible. He argues that the greater good brought about by the exposure of processes and practices that would otherwise remain hidden, should be prioritised over and above the wishes of the participants.

Lillie and Ayling (2020: 902) have written a lucid response to Gaztambide-Fernández's position, using their own experiences as early career researchers working with elite schools and their communities so as to illustrate some of the complexities that can come about when working with such groups, including the dangers involved in the undermining of relations with elites, stating that 'even if the un/ethical disrupts power at the time

it is deployed, if we cannot continue to do research as a field, we cannot investigate inequalities over time'.

Navigating my way through the complex ethical dilemmas of working with an elite group has thus proven tricky. This requires a nuanced understanding and problematising of the different ethical issues faced, informed by the ethical guidelines set out by my institution[4] and the British Educational Research Association as well as the work of such researchers as Gaztambide-Fernández and Lillie and Ayling. However, one fundamental way in which my ethical approach differs from that of the un/ethical championed by Gaztambide-Fernández is that I firmly believe that we, as researchers working with young people, have an ethical responsibility to protect participants. Therefore, it was imperative that the correct means of consent were sought and that the aims and methods of the project were appropriately communicated to the school community via a letter from the deputy head, a whole-school assembly and subsequent follow-up workshops with participants. Furthermore, written consent was sought from all interviewees and focus group participants, and parents when necessary, making them aware of the fact that they could withdraw from the research process at any point without being disadvantaged in any way.

The Architectural Spaces of FPS

Prior to embarking on a description of the school rituals performed by the FPS community, it is important to consider the physical nature of the school space, to provide an overview of the architectural framework through and upon which meanings are imbibed and inscribed, so contributing to the institutional habitus that serves to mediate the social codes present in the school (Reay et al., 2010). Indeed, if you were to visit the school you would be presented with a grand red-brick facade, which would not look out of place in Oxford or Cambridge. The front heavy double doors lead straight into a wood-panelled waiting room containing cushioned benches and a vintage mahogany table adorned with copies of *Tatler* (a British magazine covering high society and politics), the *Good Schools Guide* and miscellaneous school publications. The headmaster's office adjoins the waiting room as does the staff room and the striking, cavernous grand hall, where the ritual of assembly takes place, all of which retain the feel of 'pseudo-aristocratic' history and tradition of an elite private school: high ceilings, wood panelling and an air of stiff formality. A walk along a corridor lined with classrooms takes you to the dining hall, a room of similar stature to the assembly hall, where portraits of middle-aged white men bear down on students sat on long wooden refectory benches, hurriedly eating plates heaped high with lunch. Engraved gold lettered lists of previous head boys (and now one or two head girls) line the walls nearest to the stairs, which, like the portraits of ex-headmasters, act as a constant reminder of the history and rituals that create and recreate the school's sense of itself.

However, the grand communal 'frontstage' spaces of the main entrance, assembly hall and dining hall, prepared for an audience of outsiders and visitors, run in stark contrast to the appearance of some of the other, more informal or 'backstage' spaces around the school, several of which are composed of relatively unkempt and cramped classrooms and corridors, with posters often found falling off the walls and desks and chairs casually

pushed to one side. A trip to the science labs displays rooms that are clean and well resourced but treated in a relaxed manner by both the students and the teachers; students' bags and clothes are strewn haphazardly across the desks at the back of the classrooms and teachers' papers and books are strewn similarly haphazardly across the desk at the front of the classroom. The treatment of the school space is mirrored one by the other, so resulting in the functionality of classrooms, although generally fit for purpose, situated in juxtaposition with the commanding and ceremonial environments of the school's communal spaces, where the rituals described later in this article take place.

The small classroom next to the office in which I worked acts as a clear example of a backstage space, with students sitting in the room prior to an important coursework deadline, some at computers, others with chairs pulled up to the table in the centre. Headphones adorn ears and they are dressed casually, with one boy in a shockingly bright tie-dye T-shirt. 'I like your T-shirt' I say to him jokingly as I walk into the room to collect some photocopying. 'No, you definitely don't' he laughs, sat amid empty packets of crisps and cans of soft drink, which are littered around the room. Surprisingly, the students are all still in the room at the end of the day, fighting over access to the printer but still seemingly enjoying themselves. 'I thought they would all be gone by midday' says the head of department to me, wearily. It is during these moments that students really relax into the school environment, treating it, as numerous participants told me, as a 'home away from home'. Thus, students move seamlessly between the different spaces, taking little to no notice of the grandeur of the assembly hall, and in turn taking little to no notice of the nature of the classrooms and offices in which they carry out their schoolwork, print their coursework or have meetings with their teachers.

Interviews with alumni such as Alex, now an undergraduate at Oxford University, consistently highlighted how being used to navigating such spaces informed future experiences at university and in the workplace. For example, Alex talks of his experience of drinks with his new tutors when embarking on his first year at Balliol college:

> When you're made to socialise outside of an academic environment and when you're made to deal with impressive, successful people who sit there you know, tutors in a 14th-century room drinking port, it's very much more familiar . . . it feels like sitting in the grand hall, it feels like a continuation . . . it is significantly easier to have come from a similar background to the one in which you find yourself at university.

This feeling of familiarity or continuity was similarly reported during informal discussions as well as a focus group with the youngest members of the senior school community (year 7) and was particularly the case for those who had attended the linked junior school where students are given the opportunity to use the facilities of the senior school on a weekly basis:

Emma (E):	Had you been up here before?
Anthony (A):	Yes.
Francis (F):	A couple of times . . . We only know . . . We only knew the grand hall, because that's where we did all of the concerts.
E:	Do you think it helped you having been up here before?

A:	Yes.
E:	How?
Robert:	Because you could . . . You . . . I kind of could envision, like, how things would move around, how long it might take to . . . like, the scale of things, yes, some kind of scale of things.

We can therefore see the extent to which the familiarity with certain spaces, whether it be at the transition from junior to senior school, or senior school to university, enables a sense of 'ease' within a formal environment that might otherwise have been very alien, to the extent that they treat these spaces, whether considered formal or informal, like a 'home away from home'. In short, repeated exposure to experiences within an environment are key to the acquisition of familiar knowledge, of feeling comfortable within a certain situation or physical setting (Felder, 2021). However, and as we shall now see, the complex nature of these interactions with the school's built environment become further emphasised when considered in relation to the symbolic performance of school rituals.

Ritual, Performance and Uniform

In this section, I focus on the nuances of those school events that are part of the 'expressive order' of the school as 'consensual' rituals, or those that 'function so as to bind together all members of the school, staff and pupils as a moral community, a distinct collectivity' (Bernstein, 1975: 55), which take place within the frontstage space of the assembly hall. Thus, I look at broader school-based rituals – whole school assemblies, prize-givings and open evenings. These episodes in the school calendar constitute part of the 'expressive order' (Bernstein, 1975) of the institution and are therefore an aspect 'of the organisation practices, attitudes and assumptions' (Reay et al., 2001: 21) that contribute to the institutional habitus of FPS. They are repeated at different points throughout the year and follow a very precise choreography. Therefore, it is not just the act of the ritual itself, but the nature of the ritual and for *whom* it is performed that is key to providing a better understanding as to how such practices contribute towards the inculcation of valued forms of capital such as 'ease'.

The stalwart of the school's ritualised gatherings is morning assemblies in the main hall where the entire student and staff body meet. This happens on a regular basis throughout the school year, with particular emphasis on assemblies taking place at the end of term, where the ritual will be punctuated with prize-giving and musical interludes. The students enter the hall in dribs and drabs, seated in their form groups and according to their 'house'.[5] Wooden chairs are laid out in six separate sections across the newly sanded parquet flooring facing the stage and a lone wooden lectern. The students sit according to their age, with the younger years sat closest to the front and the oldest at the back, the furthest away from the action.

The order of service of assemblies at FPS appears to be highly regimented. The seating is nearly always arranged in the same way, facing towards a lone wooden lectern atop a podium. On occasion a screen will be set up at the front of the hall, should the student or member of staff taking the assembly require audio-visual support. The head boy or girl

will approach the lectern and stand in silence, signifying that the students should stop talking and assembly is about to start. As hush falls, the student seated closest to the school office will open the door to allow the headmaster (wearing an academic gown) to enter the assembly hall and stride over to join the head boy or girl at the lectern. The students and staff are expected to mark his appearance by standing up and so his walk across the hall is accompanied by the noise of wooden chair legs being dragged across the floor, and the same again as the students sit down before announcements start.

On the surface, this could be deemed a highly choreographed and formal series of events designed as a frontstage spectacle for an audience of visitors. However, look closer and you start to identify patterns of behaviour that circumvent the expectation of formality presented by the performance of this ritual. Sixth-formers lounge in their chairs, somewhat scruffy and hair unkempt, phones in hand and glanced at under cover of a scuffed sweatshirt sleeve. Students get up from their seats to accept accolades for academic or sporting achievements blazer-less, shirts untucked. On one occasion, I am talking to a colleague just outside the hall as the assembly starts when two students attempt to enter the double doors. My colleague accosts them with an 'ahem, bit late aren't you?'. 'Fashionably sir' one of them replies, pushing his floppy hair back behind his ear as he saunters into the room.

Therefore, a visitor to a school assembly might be greeted with the pomp and ceremony of a historic ritual at an elite private school, characterised by silence, academic gowns and an air of respect for authority, tradition and history. Again, we might see this as the visible frontstage performance of the ritual of assembly within the grand space of the main hall. However, repeated experiences of these events uncover layers of 'suppressed' activity traditionally relegated to the backstage spaces of the school, being given the opportunity to emerge. There are, in this instance, multiple performances taking place, both in terms of the accentuated and suppressed activity (Goffman, 1990). Indeed, the frontstage and backstage performances are taking place in tandem, resulting in a scenario in which students become comfortable with both formality as well as subversions of formal ritual. These behaviours and attitudes thus become normalised and normal. Taking Goffman's theoretical framework further we might say that the school community is constantly undertaking a complex form of 'impression management' where a system of multiple performances take place concurrently.

There are exceptions to the above; ritualised gatherings where the backstage performance remains suppressed. For example, prize-giving evenings or once yearly 'client-facing' assemblies, following the same format as a daily assembly but where outside members of the school community are invited in: parents, school governors and special guest speakers, generally alumni of the school, now in the public eye, or a famous parent with a child in the school. In this case, the event is very much a performance that is painstakingly choreographed or 'expressively accentuated' (Goffman, 1990: 114) where the headmaster, assistant heads and guests sit on grand chairs on the podium, flanked by huge vases of flowers and piles of books acting as prizes and where the order of events follows the same series of formalised steps as school photographs demonstrate have been followed for decades.

Open evenings at FPS follow a similar, highly formalised format. These take place at the beginning of the school year and provide an opportunity for the school to sell itself to

prospective new families, once again emphasising the importance of audience in relation to the performance of a school ritual (Goffman, 1990). Current students are recruited to provide personal tours, and parents are presented with the school at its very best; classrooms are tidied and the correct uniform is insisted upon. Heads of department are on hand after a talk by a member of the senior management team, and prospective students and parents are provided with another opportunity to network with and ask questions of members of staff in senior and middle management positions. It is important to note, however, that the tour itinerary rarely includes a visit to the backstage areas of the school described earlier. Instead, the prospective parents and students are taken to visit the parts of the school deemed as most acceptable for the eyes of potential new families. As such, it becomes the case that a certain institutional effect or habitus (Reay et al., 2010) enables those involved in these types of ritualised events to become attuned to the needs of different audiences, as well as their own need to ensure the school's reputation continues to be upheld. They thus develop an ability to be able to interpret when and to whom to present a specific persona or way of being.

It subsequently emerges that a comprehension of school ritual is key to the provision of a sociological understanding of the micro-practices underpinning how students begin to understand how to perform in certain situations. They are learning when it is permissible for the backstage performance to emerge – as modelled via their behaviour in the assembly hall where there is often an undercoat of minor transgression, manifested in the form of uniform infringements, or at times, low-level disruptive behaviour in the form of deliberate misbehaviour, which is tolerated without significant repercussions. The rituals outlined above are all performed in a set way; they are formalised, symbolic and historic performances that are enacted in specific spaces and architectural stages across the school site, but this formal performance, when there is no outside audience to impress, has become fused with informality and we are left with rituals where it is exactly this fusion of concurrent multiple performances that becomes the norm.

A further example can be identified in that of the school's approach to uniform where, in the same way that the grand assembly hall of the school does not represent the nature of the school's physical spaces in entirety, the ideal of neatly dressed pupils presented by the school through official publications and the ritual of client-facing open evenings does not represent the day-to-day reality – a cursory glance through the window of a typical classroom would highlight a variety of different uniform contraventions, including blazers forgotten and shirts untucked. Indeed, an ex-student David, now at Cambridge university, succinctly highlights the student attitude towards uniform below:

David (D):	On the first day, it was James actually, literally on my first day, so the orientation day in year 9, I arrived in my school uniform and *James untucked my shirt for me*.
Emma (E):	Did he?
D:	Yes. I think that was quite a good . . . Literally, it was an hour in, I was standing outside and James was like what are you doing? I was quite small as well so my shirts were quite long, so it was like a blouse.

A discussion within a peer-led focus group between students in year 13 further emphasises the extent to which school uniform plays a role in how students perceive of themselves, each other and in this case, the school rules on uniform:

Callum (C):	Sixth form has no defined uniform.
Ben (B):	Right, the sixth form has no uniform but . . .
Dylan (D):	They say no tracksuits but even that . . .
B:	Yes.
Kai (K):	For the sake of the recording I'll say I'm in tracksuits as we speak.
Harry (H):	Yes, so it's . . . But it is worth noting that people do not pay attention to the rules. They are just not interested. The need for . . .
Orson (O):	I think we are really supposed to bend the rules.
H:	It's interesting why we think we can get away with that.
B:	Yes.

What becomes clear here is the tension once again between formality and informality. The students have to navigate and negotiate this boundary, constantly ensuring that they remain on the right side of the line to adequately perform what it means to be an FPS student in different contexts. Kai even goes so far as to state for the recording that he is wearing a tracksuit, explicitly referring to the fact that he has subverted the desired frontstage performance in this instance, and proudly so. This flexible take is backed by Orson, who goes on to state that he thinks *the students are really supposed to bend the rules*, thus highlighting the 'distinction between learning rules, which are easy, and learning practices, which are far more challenging, as they require living the relations in question' (Khan, 2011: 84). As such, the school is providing students with the tools through which they can learn to negotiate their way through the institutional procedures and protocols of school life. Where a student will go to the lengths of untucking his peer's shirt to fit with common institutional practice and ensure David understands one of the many ways in which he might perform his belonging to the school space.

However, when students are required to face an outside audience, their performance reflects the fact that this daily ritual has ultimately served its consensual function (Bernstein, 1975): it has created a sense of pride, belonging and community within the school. When it is seen to matter, or when a performance is required for an audience of outsiders, the students follow the instructions on the laminated sheet given to those providing parental tours to 'wear your blazer and tie, and ensure your top button is done up'. Therefore, the students are given the opportunity to navigate social codes regarding when a certain performance is required and for whom. And it is, as I have shown before, the repeated practise of such navigation without fear of subsequent significant repercussions (Taylor, 2021) that contributes towards the furnishing of the students at FPS with forms of embodied cultural capital, or modes of relating (Prieur and Savage, 2013) to different social situations whether front or backstage, that is so valued by elite higher education institutions and professions (Ashley and Empson, 2017; Rivera, 2015).

Conclusion

This article highlights the ways in which the fragile boundary between front and back-stage is constantly being tested by members of the FPS school community. The architecture or built environment within which the daily life of the school takes place displays a clear manifestation of this tension from the outset, as the grand event spaces of the school are juxtaposed with the opposing nature of the classrooms and staff offices. Parallels can be drawn here with other elite spaces such as the more extreme example of the Houses of Parliament, where 'away from the grand chambers of the House of Commons and House of Lords . . . the palace is tatty (and) dirty' (Higgins, 2017) where most visitors are exposed to the frontstage grandeur of the building, as opposed to the spaces that are in a state of disrepair. As such, the repeated experience of navigating their way through these juxtapositions in type and use of space becomes normal and normalised; the students move through varying spaces without so much as batting an eyelid, potentially preparing students like Alex for similar spaces of power and privilege they may come across when leaving school.

School rituals or formalised, symbolic and historic performances take place frequently throughout the school year and often within the grand physical spaces outlined earlier. They inscribe themselves onto the school space, contributing to the distinct institutional habitus that permeates through time as well as across space (Reay et al., 2010). Once again, the tension between formal and informal is clear in terms of the ways in which students conduct themselves at these events. There is often evidence of dissent throughout these 'consensual' rituals and the type of interactions or behaviour contraventions taking place are not as they might first appear. While, when there is an outside audience present for the ritual, for whom that ritual has been designed, the students willingly perform appropriately, complying with uniform rules that are often unobserved on a typical school day, thus demonstrating the success of such rituals in heightening the respect of the individuals within the school community for the social order of FPS (Bernstein, 1975). Therefore, it is through this subtle treading or navigation of an unclear boundary between what is tolerated and what is not that students are able to practise how to approach similar situations in different contexts, and it is through learning where and when it is appropriate to perform in certain ways that contributes to the formation of certain embodied dispositions such as 'ease' or 'polish' that have been shown to help propel these students into advantageous future life trajectories (Ashley and Empson, 2017; Rivera, 2015). Moreover, an area for future research into the practices of elite schools should consider the ways in which students for whom the spaces and places of FPS have been shaped (white, male and elite) are able to become most at ease within the environment I have described, so as to assess the extent to which multiply advantaged students in particular benefit more from the repeated exposure to experiences and performances taking place within the school space.

The above are just a selection of the different ways in which students perform their privilege at FPS, as reinforced via ritual and manifested through specific attitudes and performances around the perception of and compliance with institutional procedures. The students learn to play the rules of the game within the elite school space (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). However, it is important to note the messy nature of this game,

where the veneer of formality presented by the school and its students, through its grand spaces and rituals, disguises a web of complex interactions and relationships that characterise life at FPS. It is therefore crucial that the distinct manner of inculcation of the forms of capital described above is recognised, so as to enable a better understanding and subsequent potential disruption of the processes and practices that enable the ongoing propulsive power of such schools.

ORCID iD

Emma Taylor https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1471-1244

Notes

1. Also known as the Clarendon Group. These schools are considered to be at the top of the so-called hierarchy when it comes to elite schools in the UK.
2. The name of the school and all featured participants are pseudonyms so as to protect their anonymity.
3. Fees range from between £20,000 and £25,000 per year.
4. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the London School of Economics and Political Science, where this research was undertaken.
5. The school's pastoral system is such that each is allocated to a specific 'house'. The head of house, along with their form tutors are responsible for the safety and well-being of these specific students.

References

Adler P and Adler P (1994) Observational techniques. In: Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 377–392.

Ahmet A (2020) Who is worthy of a place on these walls? Postgraduate students, UK universities, and institutional racism. *Area* 52(4): 678–686.

Angod L and Gaztambide-Fernández R (2019) Endless land, endless opportunity: The coloniality of elite boarding school landscapes. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik*. Available at: https://www.academia.edu/39285109/Endless_Land_Endless_Opportunity_The_Coloniality_of_Elite_Boarding_School_Landscapes (accessed 2 December 2021).

Ashley L and Empson L (2017) Understanding social exclusion in elite professional service firms: Field level dynamics and the 'professional project'. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(2): 211–229.

Bernstein B (1975) *Class, Codes and Control / Vol.3, Towards a Theory of Educational Transmissions*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu P (1986) The forms of capital. In: Richardson J (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York, NY: Greenwood Press, 241–258.

Bourdieu P (1996) *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Oxford: Polity Press.

Bourdieu P and Passeron JC (1990) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage.

Butler J (2006) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London: Routledge.

Douglas M (1991) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.

Felder M (2021) Familiarity as a practical sense of place. *Sociological Theory* 39(3): 180–199.

Forbes J and Lingard B (2015) Assured optimism in a Scottish girls' school: Habitus and the (re) production of global privilege. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36(1): 116–136.

Fortier A (1999) Re-membering places and the performance of belonging(s). *Theory, Culture & Society* 16(2): 41–64.

Friedman S and Laurison D (2019) *The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Gaztambide-Fernández RA (2009) *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gaztambide-Fernández RA (2015) Elite entanglements and the demand for a radically un/ethical position: The case of wienie night. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28(9): 1129–1147.

Goffman E (1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

Green F and Kynaston D (2019) *Engines of Privilege: Britain's Private School Problem*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Higgins C (2017) 'A tale of decay': The Houses of Parliament are falling down. *The Guardian*. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2017/dec/01/a-tale-of-decay-the-houses-of-parliament-are-falling-down (accessed 11 June 2024).

Horvat EM and Antonio AL (1999) Hey, those shoes are out of uniform: African American girls in an elite high school and the importance of habitus. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 30(3): 317–342.

Howard A (2008) *Learning Privilege: Lessons of Power and Identity in Affluent Schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Howard A and Kenway J (2015) Canvassing conversations: Obstinate issues in studies of elites and elite education. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28(9): 1005–1032.

Howard A and Maxwell C (2020) Conferred cosmopolitanism: Class-making strategies of elite schools across the world. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(2): 164–178.

Jerolmack C and Khan S (2014) Talk is cheap: Ethnography and the attitudinal fallacy. *Sociological Methods & Research* 43(2): 178–209.

Kenway J and Koh A (2013) The elite school as 'cognitive machine' and 'social paradise': Developing transnational capitals for the national 'field of power.' *Journal of Sociology* 49(2–3): 272–290.

Khan SR (2011) *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Khan SR (2016) The education of elites in the United States. *L'année Sociologique* 66(1): 171–192.

Lillie K (2021) Multi-sited understandings: Complicating the role of elite schools in transnational class formation. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(1): 82–96.

Lillie K and Ayling P (2020) Revisiting the un/ethical: The complex ethics of elite studies research. *Qualitative Research* 21(6): 890–905.

McCloskey A (2014) The promise of ritual: A lens for understanding persistent practices in mathematics classrooms. *Educational Studies in Mathematics* 86(1): 19–38.

McLaren P (1993) *Schooling as a Ritual Performance: Towards a Political Economy of Educational Symbols and Gestures*. London: Routledge.

Maxwell C and Aggleton P (2014) The reproduction of privilege: Young women, the family and private education. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 24(2): 189–209.

Maxwell C and Aggleton P (2015) Researching elite education: Affectively inferred belongings, desires and exclusions. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 28(9): 1065–1080.

O'Reilly K (2004) *Ethnographic Methods*. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis.

Pillow W (2003) Confession, catharsis, or cure? Rethinking the uses of reflexivity as methodological power in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16(2): 175–196.

Prieur A and Savage M (2013) Emerging forms of cultural capital. *European Societies* 15(2): 446–267.

Quantz R (2011) *Rituals and Student Identity in Education: Ritual Critique for a New Pedagogy*. New York, NY: AIAA.

Reay D, Crozier G and Clayton J (2010) 'Fitting in' or 'standing out': Working-class students in UK higher education. *British Educational Research Journal* 36(1): 107–124.

Reay D, David M and Ball S (2001) Making a difference? Institutional habituses and higher education choice. *Sociological Research Online* 5(4): 14–25.

Reeves A, Friedman S, Rahal C, et al. (2017) The decline and persistence of the old boy: Private schools and elite recruitment 1897 to 2016. *American Sociological Review* 82(6): 1139–1166.

Rivera LA (2015) *Pedigree: How Elite Students Get Elite Jobs*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Taylor E (2021) 'No fear': Privilege and the navigation of hierarchy at an elite boys' school in England. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 42(7): 935–950.

The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (2019) *Elitist Britain*. Available at: https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Elitist-Britain-2019.pdf (accessed 27 June 2022).

Turner V (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Routledge.

Emma Taylor is Lecturer in Education at King's College London. She joined King's from LSE where she held the position of teaching fellow on LSE's flagship interdisciplinary course for all undergraduate students, LSE100. She was a Leverhulme Doctoral Scholar in the department of Sociology at the LSE and she has a particular interest in the reproduction of inequalities through the education system. Her PhD research sought to investigate the micro-practices of elite formation within an independent boys' school setting in England. Based on in-depth, long-term ethnographic analysis, the research provides a unique insider's perspective on the conditions that enable and scaffold the formation of elite dispositions among students.