

A concerted effort? How an elite London school, its students, and their parents negotiate university admissions

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis explores how an elite London independent girls' school, its students, and its parents collectively negotiate university admissions. It makes a major contribution to the study of elite schooling through sustained dialogue with the literature around the 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2011) enacted by middle-class parents. It also reframes Lareau's ideas around 'concerted cultivation' in important new ways, using 'concerted' to signal mutually reinforcing work carried out by multiple actors in relationship with one another. Finally, it highlights the importance of attending to the tensions that are part of working collectively and 'in concert'. The research draws upon interviews with sixth form students and their parents, senior school staff, and external tutors, as well as participant observation.

First, I show how one can see an elite school as closely engaged in 'concerted cultivation' in terms of its work to help students negotiate elite university admissions. One can conceptualise the school as performing a parenting role, in the way that it enacts 'concerted cultivation' work. This lens on the elite school is an important one, as it illuminates the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools work to systematically secure advantage for their students in the context of elite university admissions. These ranged from: the development of particular kinds of academic selves that led students to seek out the particular kind of learning that Oxbridge facilitates, and directly prepared them to be academically competitive applicants; the deployment of the biographies of teachers and past pupils to both foster an affective affinity with elite universities, as well as offer practical direction-finding guidance for the journey; and the organisational work of overseeing and monitoring the students' applications to ensure their timely and effective completion. This level of empirical detail has been neglected in the elite schooling literature to date.

Second, I show how the work of ensuring elite university entrance is the result of the mutually reinforcing actions of multiple actors, not only encompassing parents and the school, but also students themselves, and private tutors—I term this 'cultivation in concert', deploying an orchestral musical metaphor. This marks an important contribution to the field of elite schooling, which has tended to neglect the role of parents and private tutors in shaping young people and their trajectories. It also makes a fruitful contribution to studies of 'concerted cultivation', which have not paid serious attention to the roles of multiple actors working together, and the complexities of this work.

Third, drawing on this metaphor I illuminate the complexity of 'cultivation in concert', showing how this collaborative work between different actors was also charged with inherent disagreements and tensions among them. In this way, I make visible the complex relationships and realities of how privilege is enacted on-the-ground, in order to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how educational advantage is (re)produced.

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Glossary of Key Terms

A Level	General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level qualification
EPQ	Extended Project Qualification
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education qualification
IB	International Baccalaureate
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In the UK, elite private schools disproportionately channel their pupils into elite universities (Green & Kynaston, 2019, p. 14), which in turn propel them on to positions of wealth and influence in society (Savage, 2015; The Sutton Trust, 2019a). In this way, elite schools are 'engines of privilege', given that they provide a range of resources that further advantage the children of a very affluent, statistically small sector of society. The schools are dominated by the very wealthy—among families in the top 1% income bracket in the UK, 60% of children attend private schools. At other areas of the income scale the figures are drastically lower, and it is not until the top 15% of incomes that children's private school attendance reaches a rate of 10% (Green & Kynaston, 2019, p. 2). Further, just 8% of pupils at schools belonging to the Independent Schools Council (ISC) receive means-tested bursaries, and no more than 1% of these pupils pay no fees at all (ibid., p. 127).

There is a clear injustice in the chasm in resources between the state and private sectors. The average private school teacher instructs half the number of students as the average teacher in the state sector (ibid., p. 100), and at the sixth form level private schools' financial resources per student (largely calculated from school fees) are roughly four times the average expenditure per student at state schools (ibid., p. 102). This undermines the notion of a fair society, when students are educated in two separate and very unequal systems, largely based on family income.

The reality also lays bare the myth of a 'meritocratic' society where one's path is not determined by the socio-economic status of one's parents, but instead by one's individual talents and effort. Instead, we face a largely hereditary meritocracy, where elites are effectively able to shape and to define merit in their own image (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2020). This has serious implications for building a just society.

Further, in a society that purports to be 'meritocratic', social status and esteem are intimately linked with an individual's educational and profession achievements, as these are seen to be the natural result of how deserving one is, based on one's own talents and efforts. This belief, if unchecked by the reality of structures of power and inequality that shape 'merit', can lead to hubris on the part of elites and disconnection with less advantaged members of society (Markovits, 2019; Sandel, 2020). Many have blamed shifts towards greater political polarisation, as well as populist backlash against elites, on the widespread false belief that society is a 'meritocratic' one where

everyone ‘gets what they deserve’ (Sandel 2020). This was most acutely evidenced in the UK by the Brexit vote in 2016, and indeed it appears to be a global trend with the election of populist leaders around the world.

For these reasons, the spaces of private schooling and affluent parenting warrant deep examination. In particular, I examine these spaces in relation to elite university admissions, as entrance to elite universities has been shown to in turn facilitate access to elite careers and positions of influence in society (The Sutton Trust, 2019a). In particular, the link between attendance at elite independent secondary schools and entrance to Britain’s most elite universities, including Oxford and Cambridge, is the subject of a constant cycle of media attention and public outrage (Coughlan, 2018).

Contributions of the study

The recent sociological literature on elite schooling has tended to analyse this facet of educational advantage primarily through the lens of the elite school, with less empirical detail regarding the role played by students’ families. Further, there is a lack of fine-grained, nuanced ethnographic data on the topic, where studies often reduce students at elite schools to generalised caricature (Fahey, 2014; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Kenway, Langmead, & Epstein, 2015).

However, educational advantage must be examined from multiple reinforcing angles in order to be better understood. This thesis makes a major contribution to the study of elite schooling by putting it into sustained dialogue with the literature around the ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2011) enacted by middle-class parents. It also reframes Lareau’s ideas around ‘concerted cultivation’ in important new ways, using ‘concerted’ to signal mutually reinforcing work carried out by multiple actors in relationship with one another. Finally, it highlights the importance of attending to the tensions that are part of working collectively and ‘in concert’.

First, I show how one can see an elite school as closely engaged in ‘concerted cultivation’ in terms of its work to help students negotiate elite university admissions. One can conceptualise the school as performing a parenting role, in the way that it enacts ‘concerted cultivation’ work. This lens on the elite school is an important one, as it illuminates the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools work to systematically secure advantage for their students in the context of elite university

admissions. I show how this work has academic, social, and organisational dimensions. This level of empirical detail has been neglected in the elite schooling literature to date.

Second, I show how the work of ensuring elite university entrance is the result of the mutually reinforcing actions of multiple actors, not only encompassing parents and the school, but also students themselves, and private tutors—I term this 'cultivation in concert', deploying an orchestral musical metaphor. This marks an important contribution to the field of elite schooling, which has tended to neglect the role of parents and private tutors in shaping young people and their trajectories. It also makes a fruitful contribution to studies of 'concerted cultivation', which have not paid serious attention to the roles of multiple actors working together, and the complexities of this work. Moreover, I show how this collaborative work between different actors was also charged with inherent disagreements and tensions among them. In this way, I make visible the complex relationships and realities of how privilege is enacted on-the-ground, in order to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how educational advantage is (re)produced.

Notably, amongst the literature on affluent parenting few studies have examined the most affluent families in the world, (see Chiang, 2018 and Sherman, 2019 for exceptions, in Beijing and New York City respectively), and less so, the particular dynamics of their connections to some of the most elite schools (Chiang, 2018 begins to explore this in a Chinese context, but does not analyse the work of the school in depth). This research represents such an analysis, exploring the contours of how an elite London independent girls' school, its students, and their parents negotiate university admissions. The study analyses the reproduction of privilege through the involvement of affluent White and Asian families in the school's work of preparing students to apply to Russell Group universities.[1] It draws upon interviews with sixth form students and their parents, senior school staff, and external tutors, as well as participant observation.

[1] The Russell Group is an association of 24 research-intensive universities in the UK. Amongst the research participants, and more generally, the term is often used as a proxy for the most academically selective and prestigious universities in the UK. Some universities that meet these criteria but are not members of the association, such as the University of St Andrews and the University of Bath, were often referred to by participants as 'Russell Group' universities.

Methodologically, the single-sited focus of this research and the attention paid to multiple actors: school, students, and parents, and even private tutors, allowed for a fine-grained conceptualisation of how these actors worked in 'concert'. This intense focus on one particular site allowed for a better understanding of the complex nature of this collective work, and the tensions therein, than studies of elite schooling that have often straddled multiple school sites.

Given the importance around understanding how privilege is reproduced in elite school sixth forms and affluent families, this thesis also seeks to offer policy insights and implications regarding ways to address issues around widening participation at elite universities. This thesis is underpinned by the following research question:

How do an elite London independent girls' school, its students, and their parents negotiate university admissions?

'Negotiation'

The term 'negotiate' is used intentionally in my operative research question. The process of reproducing privilege inherently involves a facility with negotiation of various kinds—of institutions and of hierarchies—in order to achieve actors' desired ends. A process of negotiation implies the multilateral involvement of multiple actors, a process wherein multiple actors have power and agency. This makes 'negotiation' a particularly salient term in contexts of privilege, where the school, its students, and their families all possess degrees of power and agency. Indeed, in some studies of elite schooling, privilege itself is described as being 'negotiated' (Howard, 2014).

It follows, therefore that the term is used often to explain how affluent parents interact with schools to advantage their children (Calarco, 2018; Howard & Maxwell, 2021; Lareau, 2011; Weis et al., 2014). The term is also used to conceptualise how students learn to do this work themselves, 'negotiating' with adult authority figures such as their own parents (Lareau, 2011) and their teachers (Calarco, 2018). However, the process of 'negotiation' implies a degree of uncertainty about the exact outcome, and creates conceptual space for tensions between the actors, as Howard and Maxwell (2021), found when analysing 'cultural negotiations' between parents and faculty at an elite Taiwanese school, including 'tensions' between the values and aims of the

actors. For these reasons, the use of the term 'negotiate' is important and fruitful in order to explore the dynamics at work among the multiple actors in this study. In Chapter 3, I will discuss the literature on 'negotiation' in the context of securing educational advantage in more detail.

Context of the study: widening participation at elite universities

The findings of this study also have implications for debates about how to most effectively widen participation at elite universities. National media and policy discourses frequently centre on the power of elite universities to foster social mobility for students from less privileged backgrounds, and thereby, it is thought, improve social inequality (Herrmann, 2020; The Sutton Trust, 2019a). However, as it stands currently there is a 'misplaced optimism' placed on these elite institutions, which in practice reproduce inequality rather than lessen it, as evidenced by the fact that their students are still drawn disproportionately from the most privileged in society (Boliver, 2017).

The academic literature on widening participation at elite universities has importantly argued for the need to reform university admissions policies to ensure fairness in the assessment of students' potential to succeed at university, pointing to the ways in which students' 'merit' is assessed in ways that advantage wealthy students (Boliver et al., 2018; Mountford-Zimdars, 2016). This includes students' examination grades, wherein socioeconomically disadvantaged students are less likely to attain the grades that the most academically selective universities require for entry (Boliver et al., 2021).

Despite the fact that many UK universities have ostensibly embraced a form of 'contextualised admissions' wherein students' academic performance is evaluated in light of the opportunities and resources available to them, some of the most academically selective elite universities have nevertheless resisted actually making lower offers of admission to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, or in some cases have reduced offers modestly by one or two grades (Boliver et al., 2018; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2021). Some of the reasons cited include fears about guaranteeing academic 'excellence' and ensuring that admitted pupils will succeed in their courses, including concerns about metrics of rates of degree completion, and the attainment of higher degree classifications at the universities (Boliver et al., 2018;

Boliver et al., 2021; Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2021). I discuss universities' contextual admissions policies in more detail in Chapter 2. I draw recommendations for university admissions practice based on the findings of this study in Chapter 9, and analyse possible futures for private school applicants in the university admissions process, in light of developments in contextual admissions.

The widening participation literature has acknowledged the role that families play in advantaging students in university admission, mostly drawing on large-scale quantitative data sets (Boliver, 2017; Marginson, 2016; Micklewright et al., 2016). There is also a need, however, for fine-grained ethnographic engagement with families to better understand the complex role that they play to advantage children in university admissions. The research that underpins this thesis works within this gap.

Even less understood is the particular role that private tutors play in unequal access to elite universities. More than a decade ago, Ball (2010) drew on secondary sources to make a case for a research agenda that would map the growth of private education services, arguing that variation in students' academic performance may be better explained by variation in families' provision of private tuition and other forms of 'enrichment' than by the performance of the schools they attend. In this study, I seek to address this gap and examine the role of these actors in the educational arena. In sum, there is a need for work that recognises the production of educational advantage as a complex mutually reinforcing process involving multiple actors, and this thesis seeks to develop a framework for such analysis.

My position in relation to the research

It is important for me to foreground here my own experience of schooling, and how this shapes my perception of Trinity School. I was born in the United States and attended a state-funded school in an affluent suburb of Boston until the age of nine. At that point, my family moved to the UK so that my father could take a position in the Lloyd's insurance market in London. We lived in Surrey and I attended an international school that offered the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme and had a varied mix of nationalities. The school charged high tuition fees and most students' parents worked for multinational companies or in the financial sector in London. The school was affluent, but culturally it felt removed from what could be

described as a more 'typical' English private school, due to its very international and transient student body made up of globally mobile families.

Furthermore, I became interested in how parents engage with their children's educational experiences while working for a global educational consultancy firm based in New York. The firm contracted with multinational corporations who relocated executives around the world on company assignments. It worked with the executives and their families to find schools for the children in the new corporate destination. Frequently, the children's education was the most important factor that determined whether an executive would be willing to move, and whether that relocation would go smoothly. That is, they would need to be assured that a move would not disrupt their children's educational trajectories, which I found, were often constructed as trajectories of success. An unknown school, or a school deemed to be of a lower standard than that which their children currently attended, were feared to jeopardise this, and could lead to declining the company secondment. I saw that many of these parents had a particular image of what success for their children looked like, often constructed in dialogue with their own trajectories of success. What was less clear was how parents might engage on a more micro-level with their children's educational experiences in a given school, and how parents would be in conversation with students themselves, and with school staff. Through this work, it became evident that planning for higher education was a key point to examine how the school, students, and parents engaged in relationship to one another, as it was one of the first opportunities for significant agency on the part of young people with regard to their educational trajectories.

In addition, I bring to this research a background in anthropology and qualitative sociology that permeates the conceptualisation of this project in two important ways. First, my background attuned me to dynamics of power and inequality, and how elite education and affluent families are embedded in this. Second, I sought to understand and empathise with participants' life-worlds, through research methods that facilitate closeness to participants' lives. I am concerned with understanding their experiences and representing their individual voices as authentically as possible, although that does not prohibit critique of wider structural issues or indeed of specific individual actors. The school chosen as the study site allowed me to do this.

The site and the study

Trinity School (a pseudonym) was chosen for a number of reasons. The school satisfies Kenway, Fahey, and Koh's (2013) definition of an elite school that has 'some degree of longevity, consistent and significant success in end-of-school public exams and entry to prestigious universities and faculties; the ongoing production of influential alumni across government, industry, the professions…and overall, high public esteem' (p. 18). Trinity School has existed for over a century and has produced female leaders across a variety of sectors. In a typical year, 75% of A Levels taken are in the A – A* range and the International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma average is 40 points (out of 45). Most students go on to Russell Group universities, usually about a dozen students from a year group of 100 go to Oxford and Cambridge each year, and several also go to the most selective universities in the US. It is significant that a central aspect of what makes a school 'elite', according to Kenway et al. (2013), is how effective it is at putting students on a trajectory towards further academic and professional success. Additionally, Trinity School is held in 'high public esteem', a proxy indicator for this is its inclusion in *Tatler* magazine's Schools' Guide.[3] Moreover, the school is a girls' school, and my research in this space will be in dialogue with the emerging tradition of research on elite girls' schooling in the UK (Fahey, 2014; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014).

The research deploys a range of methods to explore how an elite girls' school, its students, and its parents collectively negotiate university admissions. The study consisted of in-depth interviews with parents of students, sixth form students, senior school staff, and external education service providers. Participant observation and observation of university application preparation activities, observation of higher education and careers events at the school aimed at parents, and documentary analysis of key school materials was also undertaken.

Chapter outlines

The thesis is organised into nine chapters, of which this is the first. Chapter 2, composed of four parts, situates the study within historical and policy contexts, and

[3] *Tatler* is a British lifestyle magazine that caters to an affluent readership. It produces an annual editorial guide to independent schools in the UK, featuring about 100 of the 'top' independent schools.

draws on literatures which elucidate the context of the contemporary London-based elite. First, I outline the wider and historical context in which this study is situated: including the links between elite schools, elite universities, and elite careers; and the history of elite schooling and elite girls' schooling in the UK. Second, I analyse the specific context of London, including a discussion of London independent schools, and experiences of affluent parenting in London. Within this, I discuss the notion of a 'meritocratic' elite, and related literature on 'meritocracy', as well as the topic of parental anxieties about their children's future economic and social status, and the role of educational achievement in this. Third, I discuss work that positions higher education within a neoliberal frame, and its discontents. Fourth, I move to an outline of the contemporary elite university admissions landscape and possible futures. I engage current debates in the UK about independent schooling and its role in the reproduction of privilege, including debates about equity and access to elite Russell Group universities, with a particular focus on Oxford and Cambridge universities. I provide an overview of changes in elite university admissions in recent years, including the changing use of contextual admissions, and the implementation of foundation year programmes. I analyse progress made to improve equity and access, and also identify current barriers to this and limitations. I include a discussion of educational inequality and the impact of COVID-19, and move to analyse potential futures of elite university admissions in the UK.

Chapter 3 reviews the key sociological literature with which this study is in dialogue. First, foundational work in the sociology of elite schooling is discussed. Second, a focus on Bourdieusian-influenced ethnographic work in this field is outlined, with attention to the role of elite secondary schools in the reproduction of privilege and implications for elite university admissions. Third, the role of parenting in enabling schooling success is discussed. Fourth, I move to a discussion of Lareau's (2011) concept of 'concerted cultivation', which Lareau uses to explain middle-class parents' approaches to child-rearing, which in turn facilitate students' successful movement through the educational system. I show how this concept is a fruitful analytical starting point from which to theorise how parents, as well as other actors including the elite school, its students, and private tutors engage with the university admissions process, whilst also discussing critiques of the concept. I discuss the emerging tradition of 'concerted cultivation' scholarship, including work that

emphasises the complexity of parental experiences, and processes of 'negotiation' in the context of securing advantages in educational institutions.

I then draw on the small body of literature that analyses how parents of elite school students engage with the university admissions process, and point to the theoretical and empirical gaps in this work. Moreover, I discuss authors who have deployed the concept of 'concerted cultivation' in educational settings in limited ways. I argue for a new conceptualisation of 'cultivation in concert', attending to the complex and nuanced collective work of multiple actors. Finally, I analyse literature that examines the rationales that underpin parents' enactment of 'concerted cultivation' work.

Chapter 4 includes a reflection upon my positionality as a researcher, an account of how access to the school was negotiated and how participants were recruited, and an outline of the research design and methods employed. I reflect upon the ethical implications of the research, and the challenges of interviewing. I conclude with an explanation of how the data was analysed.

Chapter 5 focuses upon the school as an institution that enacts 'concerted cultivation' work which, importantly, also moves students in clearly directed ways towards particular elite university destinations. The organisational, social, and academic facets of the ways in which students were positioned and resourced to move effectively towards elite educational destinations are analysed.

Chapter 6 analyses how students, parents, and private tutors worked 'in concert' with the school to negotiate university admissions. The complexity of this collective work is attended to, with areas of agreement, as well as dissonance and tensions, among the multiple actors. The cases of three particular mothers are presented—Alice, Lisa, and Frances, illustrating the range of ways that parents work 'in concert' with their children, the school, and private tutors to negotiate university admissions. The barriers that parents faced in their efforts to support their children are brought to the fore, and the role of private tutors in remedying these issues are also elaborated.

Moreover, the chapter analyses how students learned to enact 'concerted cultivation' work for themselves, as they negotiated power structures both inside and outside the school. In this vein, the particular cases of two students, Amelia and Arabella, are analysed. Attention is also paid to affective inequality amongst affluent White students within the school, using the particular cases of two students, Clara and

Samantha, to show how students' varying levels of confidence and self-belief shaped the efficacy of their attempts to meet their desired aims within the school context. The ways in which private tutors helped address these issues are also elaborated.

Chapter 7 attends to the school's and parents' rationales that underpinned the 'concerted cultivation' work they carried out. Areas of agreement between the school and many Trinity parents in their respective emphases on academic achievement and their desires to direct students towards elite university destinations are outlined. However tensions among the actors are also presented, and the conflicted experiences of parents are analysed, including affective concerns about their children's wellbeing, and of the possible negative effects of pressure to achieve.

Chapter 8 discusses the important theoretical contribution of this thesis. This thesis makes a major contribution to the study of elite schooling by putting it into sustained dialogue with the literature around the 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2011) enacted by middle-class parents. It also reframes Lareau's ideas around 'concerted cultivation' in important new ways, using 'concerted' to signal mutually reinforcing work carried out by multiple actors in relationship with one another. Finally, it highlights the importance of attending to the tensions that are part of working collectively and 'in concert'.

Chapter 9 reflects upon the empirical and methodological contributions of the thesis, highlights areas for fruitful further research, and discusses the implications of the findings for the fields of university admissions, and possible futures for private sector schooling.

Chapter 2: Context for the study

1. Wider and historical context of the study

Elite school – elite university – elite career pipeline

The Sutton Trust (2018) analysed admissions data from Oxford and Cambridge from 2015-17 and found that a small number of mostly independent schools were significantly over-represented in terms of places awarded. The research found that just eight schools had as many Oxbridge acceptances as three-quarters of all schools in England (Montacute & Cullinane, 2018). The findings raced into the headlines across the media, fomenting ongoing debates about the power of elite schools to perpetuate privilege (Coughlan, 2018). They served as a potent reminder of how elite schools disproportionately channel their pupils into elite universities, which in turn propel them on to positions of wealth and influence in society.

These debates are not new, and Britain's elite schools have long been divisive symbols of privilege and reminders of deep-seated inequality. However, as the system of higher education in the UK has moved from one of elite participation by a small segment of the population, to mass participation by a much larger percentage of the population, it has been abundantly clear that despite increasing access to higher education generally, access to Britain's most elite universities remains markedly unequal (Montacute & Cullinane, 2018).

The findings of the Sutton Trust (2018) study were stark. In England, 'independent school pupils are seven times more likely to gain a place at Oxford or Cambridge compared to those in non-selective state schools, and over twice as likely to take a place at Russell Group institutions'. Overall, 60% of independent school pupils who go on to higher education attend elite Russell Group universities, 'compared to just under a quarter of those from comprehensives and sixth form colleges' (p.3).

According to the study, while 18% of pupils in England sitting A Level examinations are at independent schools, 34% of Oxbridge applications are from pupils at independent schools. The research found that 'high-achieving independent school pupils were twice as likely as state school pupils to apply to Oxford and Cambridge, even with the same ability and predicted grades'. It also found that during

the period from 2015-17, 42% of Oxbridge places were awarded to independent school students (Montacute & Cullinane, 2018). This is despite the fact that approximately 16% of the general population is privately educated at sixth form level. The figure is lower, 7%, when sixth form is not accounted for (Coughlan, 2018).

This inequality means that students from the most advantaged groups attend higher-status universities at much greater rates. In turn, graduates from elite universities are 'disproportionately represented' among the elite in society—those who hold the most wealth, power, and influence (Savage, 2015, p. 244–245). Savage noted that the 'expansion of higher education is not sufficient to break this pattern and to some extent may have reinforced it' (p. 245).

The connection between elite university attendance and elite occupations and careers is well known (see for example, Friedman & Laurison, 2019). While there is no single way to define the 'elite' sector of society, a recent Sutton Trust study conducted an analysis 'across a wide range of different professions, including individuals with the most political power and influence, those with the most wealth and the highest earnings, people working at the top of the country's key institutions and the individuals playing leading roles in our cultural life, from politics and business, to media, culture and sport' (The Sutton Trust, 2019a, p. 10). The study found that Oxbridge graduates comprised around a quarter of these elites while they number less than 1% of the population; Russell Group graduates make up nearly half of the elite group, whilst they are only 6% of the working population' (ibid., p. 2).

Further, 39% of the elite group is privately educated (ibid., p. 4), compared to approximately 16% of the general population that is privately educated at sixth form level (ibid., p. 10). Notably, of the last three UK Prime Ministers who were all Conservatives, the proportion of their Cabinet that was privately educated has been: 64% under Boris Johnson (who himself was educated at Eton and Oxford), 30% under Theresa May (who attended state schools followed by Oxford), and 50% under David Cameron (who was also educated at Eton and Oxford) (Walker, 2019).

Within the context of these links between elite schools, elite universities, and elite positions in society, this thesis explores the particular link between elite schooling and entrance to elite universities. As these universities in turn disproportionately propel their graduates on to elite positions in society, a better understanding of this link is crucial to understanding how privilege is enacted, with important implications for education policy to address issues of equity and justice.

Historical overview of elite schooling and elite girls' schooling in the UK

While there is a long history of elite male schooling – Winchester College was founded in 1382 and Eton College in 1440 – in England it is much shorter for 'public' schools for females. The schooling was 'public' in contrast to the common practice at the time for the sons of nobility to receive a private education at home. Instead, these schools drew boys from a wide geographic area and offered a communal residential life (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016, p. 16). Importantly, Winchester and Eton had formal links each with a particular college at Oxford (New) and Cambridge (King's) respectively, and prepared boys for their entry examinations.

Although the schools were founded with charitable aims and provided scholarships for students from modest means, they soon developed reputations as prestigious training grounds for the sons of society's elite. Other 'public' schools followed, and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries a new kind of 'grammar school' also entered the landscape. These were local fee-paying day schools, often founded by wealthy industrialists (ibid.).

Educational provision for girls from affluent families beyond private tuition in the home lagged behind however. A small number of private boarding schools were founded in the seventeenth century (ibid., p. 19), with a focus on the formation of 'ladies of leisure' (Walford, 2006, p. 85), where the curriculum included, 'reading, writing, religion, French, singing, dancing, needlework, and household management' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2016, p. 19).

Significantly, in the nineteenth century two London colleges were founded to train female teachers and governesses, Queen's College in 1848 and Bedford College in 1849 (Walford, 2006). These colleges produced pioneering female educators who went on to found and lead independent girls' schools that would offer more academic curricula (eg including maths and science). These women included Frances Mary Buss (who founded North London Collegiate School and the Camden School for Girls, both day schools) and Dorothea Beale (the second Principal of Cheltenham Ladies' College, a boarding school, who later founded St Hilda's College, Oxford). These women 'opened up debate about the purpose of girls' education' and 'sought to make their schools accessible to girls from a wider range of social class positions' (Purvis, 1991).

After the founding of Cheltenham Ladies College in 1854, other girls' boarding schools were founded in the late nineteenth century (including Wycombe Abbey, Roedean, and Downe House). In contrast to the 'more socially heterogeneous' girls' day schools, these boarding schools were more socially exclusive and 'served the daughters of gentlemen' (ibid., p. 87).

After their school years, women's opportunities for progression into higher education were limited, and their ability to access institutions and receive degrees was a gradual process. In 1878, the University of London became the first institution in the UK to grant women degrees (University of Oxford, 2020). In 1869 Girton College, Cambridge became the first institution in Britain to offer residential higher education to women (University of Cambridge, 2020), and the first women's colleges at Oxford followed (Lady Margaret Hall in 1878 and Somerville in 1879). Despite this, Oxford and Cambridge (in 1920 and 1948 respectively) were the last universities in the UK to grant full degree status to women.

Girls' day school focus

Whereas in the past the consummate image of educational privilege was the traditional boys' 'public' boarding school, the landscape of elite schooling in the UK is shifting. As such, this thesis centres on an independent girls' day school, and here I will contextualise what this means in the present moment.

The London-based families who participated in this research noted that for them and for many in their social circles who were considering private education, the London day school is seen as the 'first choice', with a 'country boarding school' an alternative choice if necessary, typically considered for children who are less academically inclined or otherwise struggling in school. Indeed, amongst parents at Trinity School interviewed in the course of this research, there was a broad consensus that elite London day schools were more academically rigorous and more academically selective upon entry than many elite boarding schools. Many of the families had their children sit examinations for the most selective London day schools, and if they did not gain entry, opted to send their children to prestigious country boarding schools where the entry standards were nevertheless less exacting. These included traditional 'public' schools. Parents often cited relative acceptance rates at Trinity compared to other elite independent schools outside London, and noted how much more competitive the London schools were. For these reasons, I

wanted to focus this study on an elite London day school recognising that it represented a particularly intense and competitive facet of elite schooling in the UK.

In addition, both scholarly and media discourses have increasingly emphasised an image of the high-achieving 'top girl', who excels academically, socially, and in all areas. Frequently, she is represented as endlessly striving for perfection and suffering from attendant mental health challenges (Allan, 2010; Fahey, 2014). Indeed, whilst girls now outperform boys in national examinations and in university entrance (Weale, 2018), much ink has been spilled regarding concerns about the mental health of girls in particular. A NHS study in 2018 found that young women aged 17-19 were twice as likely as young men of the same age to suffer from mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, with 23.9% suffering from mental health challenges (Triggle, 2018). It is within this context and amidst these tensions that this study explores how university admission is negotiated at a highly academically selective girls' day school.

2. London context

London independent schools

It is important to contextualise what it means to study a school in London. Drawing on the Great British Class Survey data, Cunningham and Savage (2015) argued that London is an 'elite metropolitan vortex', and that the elite within the UK 'are overwhelmingly located in London and the south-east of England'. Indeed, London overwhelmingly dominates within the UK in terms of economic power (Savage, 2015, p. 267). As a global financial hub, it also attracts an international elite.

Affluent families who choose to send their children to independent day schools in London find that entry to the most prestigious schools is extremely competitive, and once there, the education is academically intense. London is densely populated with high-achieving families, many of whom choose days schools rather than boarding as they want to educate their children closer to home.

In the course of this research, many Trinity parents lamented the focus on prestige and status amongst London parents (be it at the point of independent secondary school entry, or in the push for Oxbridge admissions). They surmised that this emphasis seemed commensurate with a large number of parents who work in the

status-conscious financial sector in particular. Indeed, the vast majority of Trinity families had at least one parent who worked in the financial sector.

Despite the relative ethnic diversity of London compared to other parts of the UK, the students at elite London schools are overwhelmingly White. This reflects the intersectional dynamics of race and class, and existing structures of power and inequality, where London's economic elite is also overwhelmingly White (Savage, 2015, p. 173).

Affluent London parenting

It is important to elucidate here who this 'London elite' is. Most Trinity students do not have inherited family wealth or long histories of familial privilege. Instead, their privilege is grounded in parents' high wages, typically in the financial and legal professions. In this way, socio-economic status is tied directly to performance and positioning in the labour market (Gill, 2013; Markovitz, 2019).

Savage (2015) called this group the 'ordinary' elite class, as opposed to the 'landed gentry' (p. 322-23). Unlike the aristocratic elite, the 'ordinary' elite is 'fundamentally marked by meritocratic motifs'—it has often 'achieved its advantaged economic position through performing well in the education system and then succeeding in the cut-throat world of high-level professional and managerial employment' (ibid., p. 323). It follows that London is 'a fundamental seat and site of the new 'ordinary' elite', as it is the economic centre of the most high-earning and prestigious occupations in the UK (ibid., p. 328).

In so far as 'meritocratic motifs' are a feature of the 'ordinary' elite, the origin of the term 'meritocracy' is important to understand. The term was coined by sociologist Michael Young in a work of dystopian fiction, intended to be a warning of the potential dark side of social changes that were underway. He was writing in the context of late 1950s Britain, as the class system was partially eroding in ways that created some opportunities for advancement in the educational system and the labour market that was ostensibly based more on merit than social background or connections. Rather than aristocratic rule, 'meritocratic' rule promised a society governed by those with the most superior native intelligence and talents—in other words, a more 'deserving' elite (Young, 1958).

However, Young argued that this system would reinforce the idea that, put simply, 'people get what they deserve' (Sandel, 2020). This would generate hubris

and snobbery among the 'meritocratic' elite, with regard to their position in relation to the rest of society. Of course, we do not live in a meritocracy, as these rewards are not justly meted out, where inter-generational privilege, plain luck, and other factors all shape how individuals fare in education and in work (Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2008).

Further, in a society that purports to be 'meritocratic', social status and esteem are intimately linked with an individual's educational and profession achievements, as these are seen to be the natural result of how deserving one is, based on one's own talents and efforts. This can produce an acute sense of 'status anxiety' (Gill, 2013), even amongst affluent professionals, who worry about losing both social and economic status for themselves (ibid.) and for their children (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2007; Weis et al., 2014). In Chapter 3, I discuss in more detail the theme of precariousness and anxiety in relation to how parents interact with schooling (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2007) and the university admissions process in particular (Weis et al., 2014).

I refer to the group from which Trinity School families are drawn as a 'pseudo-meritocratic elite', because as Savage (2015) and Markovitz (2019) acknowledged, this elite is able to confer various forms of intergenerational privilege to advantage their children and enhance their performance within the arenas of education and work. Entrance to elite universities is highly valued by this 'pseudo-meritocratic elite', due to the link between elite education and elite careers, outlined earlier in this chapter. Affluent families' resources help their children secure advantages in the educational system, through private schooling, private tuition, and parents' own relevant knowledge and networks.

There is a growing body of popular literature and media discourses that centre on affluent parenting practices. To understand the rationales that underpin these practices, which often construct parents as crazed and irrational actors, it is important to consider the role of education as a crucial site of forging and proving membership in a 'pseudo-meritocratic elite'. The more extreme actions amongst this group of elites have led to terms such as 'intensive parenting' (Cain Miller, 2018) and 'Tiger' (Chua, 2011) parenting. These terms all refer to an intensive level of adult attention to and investment in children's development, where children are subjected to heavily scheduled programmes of academic and extra-curricular 'enrichment' activities.

Another thread of these discourses refers to parents' efforts to remove obstacles that might stand in the way of their children's successful progression through the educational system in particular. These are 'helicopter' (Hamilton, 2016)

or ‘snowplough’ (The Guardian Press Association, 2014) parents, who proverbially airlift their children out of danger or bulldoze obstacles from their paths.

The scholarly literature on parents’ ‘concerted cultivation’ practices (Lareau, 2011) finds commonalities with some of these discourses, but also goes further illuminating more nuanced ways that parents confer advantage. This included adeptly navigating institutions such as schools to secure accommodations or certain advantages for their children, and imbuing in their children a comfort level with navigating hierarchies and asserting their needs. In Chapter 3, I offer a detailed account of this concept.

One of the mechanisms through which affluent parents perpetuate privilege, beyond the private school itself, is through the use of private tutoring and consultants. There is relatively little scholarly work in a UK context that analyses the role of private tutors and consultants. Pearce, Power, and Taylor (2018) analysed the prevalence of private tutoring in a Welsh context, and Vincent, Rollock, Ball, and Gillborn (2012) identified how Black middle-class families in the UK engage private tutors. Kenway, Fahey, and Koh (2013) highlighted the practice of ‘complementary education’ or ‘shadow education’ among affluent families in Hong Kong. It seems to be a growing trend globally. In part, the lack of work in this area is a result of the fact that many studies of elite schooling have focused on the formation that happens in the schools themselves (Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Kenway et al., 2015), and not in student’s homes. Furthermore many of these studies centre on boarding school environments, or less pressurised environments outside of London.

Although similar data is not available for sixth-formers, a 2019 Sutton Trust study found that ‘27% of 11-16 year-olds in England and Wales have had private tuition at some point’, and the figure has risen from 18% when the survey first began in 2005. The study noted that the ‘figure rises to 41% in London’, the highest of any region of the UK. Significantly, ‘students from ‘high affluence’ households (34%) are more likely than those from low affluence households (20%) to have received such tuition’ (The Sutton Trust, 2019b, p. 1). Research in this area of private tutoring is imperative to understand its impact on university admissions.

3. Higher education in a neoliberal frame and its discontents

Work on positioning for higher education is often situated within a neoliberal frame, where neoliberalism can be defined as 'the extension of competitive markets into all areas of life', not only the economy but areas such as education, politics, and other spheres of society, with an attendant emphasis on 'individual responsibility' (Springer, Birch, & MacLeavy, 2016, p. 2). Neoliberal assumptions and values encompass the following aspects that I will highlight here. First, an understanding of society as unequal and socio-economically stratified, with a sense of scarcity of places at the 'top'. This produces a strong sense of precariousness and a drive towards competition. Second, an emphasis on academic achievement as leading to academic credentials, which are seen as valuable in their ability to secure entrance to elite universities, which in turn provide access to elite professions that confer economic and social status within this stratified society. Third, a conceptualisation of the entrepreneurial self, with a strong sense of individual responsibility for 'successful' outcomes.

Indeed Stahl (2014) draws on Davies and Bansel (2007) to show how "schools are increasingly expected to create a neoliberal subject, the 'entrepreneur of self', who must espouse values of 'self-reliance, autonomy and independence' in order to gain 'self-respect, self-esteem, self-worth and self-advancement'" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 52; Stahl, 2014, p. 665). This brings with it a pressure to achieve and perform that takes on a moral dimension. Ball and Olmedo (2013) argued that neoliberalism is a 'moral system that subverts and re-orients us to its truth and ends. It makes us responsible for our performance and the performance of others. We are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if we do not we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible' (p. 88).

This logic extends too to the work of parents, as Vincent (2017) points to dominant neoliberal discourses regarding parents' responsibilities for their children's educational outcomes and future success. This has the potential to produce extreme levels of anxiety in parents regarding how their children fare in the educational process (Kenway et al., 2013; Weis et al., 2014).

Dominant discourses have also centred on higher education as development of human capital. Brown's (2000) concept of 'positional competition' emphasized the importance of the 'relative standing' of actors within local, national, and international

labour markets as they compete for credentials and jobs, which paints a picture of antagonism. Brown and Lauder (2006) later framed the higher education landscape in the context of a global 'competition for elite credentials and jobs'. They link elite university attendance to the likelihood of securing 'elite employment' (p. 47). Education is depicted as a tool to secure employability in an increasingly precarious economic climate. Further, Brown, Lauder, and Ashton (2011) pointed to new rising economic powers (such as China and India) and outsourcing of white-collar jobs from the global north to south as some of the factors which create an uncertain economic future, even for the children of affluent professionals. Most recently, Brown, Lauder, and Cheung (2020) pointed to the lack of 'good quality' jobs in the present economy. The authors elucidated the sense of competition and precariousness that underpins positioning for entry into elite higher education institutions. This thesis focuses on how this is worked out on the fine-grained level of schools, students, and parents.

However, there are important questions about the future of this kind of work, and how it might adapt in response to changing policies in university admissions and recruitment at elite firms. Tholen's (2017) analysis of four graduate occupations in the UK—software engineers, laboratory-based scientists, financial analysts, and press officers—problematised assumptions about university credentials themselves securing entry into graduate occupations. He pointed to elite accountancy and law firms that have de-emphasised credentials in their recruitment processes over the last few years, with Ernst & Young no longer considering degree results and Clifford Chance moving to 'CV-blind' recruitment where interviews are conducted without 'any educational information about candidates' (p. 63). Further, he identified how 'credential half-life' limits the impact of one's educational credentials as they progress farther in their careers (p. 77).

4. Contemporary elite university admissions landscape and possible futures

Overview of changes in elite university admissions in recent years

In 2004, the independent Admissions to Higher Education Steering Group published the 'Schwartz Report' (Schwartz, 2004), which called attention to issues of fairness in admissions, and made recommendations for progress in this area. Notably, this included the recommendation that contextual data regarding applicants' backgrounds be gathered as part of the centralised UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) application form, in order to inform admissions decisions. At that time, some universities already offered supplementary forms that elicited this information, but many did not (ibid.). The practice of using 'contextual admissions' grew significantly over the next decade. A survey of 68 UK universities reported that in 2012, 37% were using some form of contextual admissions, and by 2015 this number had grown to 84% (O'Sullivan, Byrne, et al., 2019; Sundorph et al., 2017).

In 2015, the government set out two key targets for widening participation in higher education in England. By 2020, the goals were to: 'double the proportion of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education' and 'increase by 20% the numbers of students from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds entering higher education'. To achieve this, ministers urged a movement beyond 'financial support' and 'outreach activities', to initiatives with 'demonstrable impact' in 'improving access and participation, progress in higher education and employment outcomes' (Connell-Smith & Hubble, 2018).

Universities responded to this call with an increasing sense of urgency and more sophisticated initiatives. I will focus my attention here on these initiatives at elite Russell Group universities in the UK, particularly Oxford and Cambridge. I will outline the major widening participation initiatives here, examining their success thus far, and pointing to possible future developments in this area.

Improving equity and access

I will outline here some of the recent progress in improving equity and access in admissions to elite universities in the UK. In 2019, the Russell Group reported that 'the number of students from the most under-represented local areas (those in POLAR Quintile 1) attending Russell Group universities increased by 30% over the five years

to 2017/18', and that 'progress has also been made in closing the gap between those from Quintile 1 versus Quintile 5 areas (the most highly represented areas)'. Further, the number of UK students from Black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds accepted to study at Russell Group universities 'has steadily increased in recent years (by 58% between 2013/14 and 2017/18)', where 'BAME students made up 21.1% of all placed 18-year old applicants to Russell Group universities in 2017 – a greater proportion than in the general young population across the UK' (Russell Group, 2019).

Oxford's annual admission report published in May 2020 announced that 'in the past five years, the percentage of state-educated students has increased from 55.6% to 62.3%. The percentage of [UK] students of Black and Minority Ethnic heritage has increased from 14.5% to 22.1%. Those from the most deprived areas have increased from 8.6% to 12.2% and those from areas with low progressions rates to university from 10.8% to 14%' (University of Oxford, 2020, p. 2).

In September 2020, Oxford announced a record highest level of new undergraduates from state schools, at 68.4%, an increase of six percentage points from the previous year (2020). However, it is important to recognise that students from state schools matriculating at Oxbridge are drawn disproportionately from a small number of top grammar schools, rather than non-selective comprehensive schools (Herrmann, 2020).

Cambridge announced similar figures regarding students from under-represented backgrounds, where 68% of incoming students in 2019-20 hailed from state schools (Booth, 2019). The university announced in September 2020 that 'the proportion of students coming from areas of low participation in higher education (using POLAR 4, Quintiles 1 and 2)' had 'risen from 13% to 14%'. Further, 'using the Index of Multiple Deprivation measure,' intake with this indicator rose 'from 18.8% to 21.7%' (University of Cambridge, 2019).

It is important to acknowledge here that universities' policies are changing rapidly. Further, it is difficult to generalise about policies at collegiate universities such as Oxford and Cambridge, as despite recent moves towards greater centralisation of access initiatives, each college administers its own admissions process and outreach activities.

Contextual admissions at elite UK universities

Through policies such as contextual admissions and programmes such as foundation years, universities are working to directly address the effects of educational inequality. They are developing more sophisticated ways to recognise the starkly unequal levels of support that applicants receive, with students from elite schools receiving the most guidance as they negotiate university admissions.

UK universities who use 'contextual admissions' use specific demographic indicators about applicants, indicated on their UCAS forms, to make admissions decisions. This includes decisions about whether to make candidates an offer, and in cases where an interview is part of the application process (this is required at Oxford and Cambridge), whether to invite a candidate to interview. In some cases, universities will also use contextual information to make reduced grade offers to candidates below the standard grade offer (O'Sullivan, Byrne, et al., 2019).

In terms of the information gathered about applicants, O'Sullivan, Byrne, et al. identified four categories of indicators that are generally used, although notably this information is not standardised across all UK universities. These are: 1) individual-level (including whether an applicant is eligible for free school meals, or has spent time in care); 2) area-level (including postcode-level metrics of disadvantage such as ACORN, which measures socio-economic disadvantage in an area, and POLAR4, which measures participation in higher education in an area); 3) school-level (including an applicant's school's average level of academic attainment); and 4) participation in widening participation programmes or outreach activities (ibid.).

While some Russell Group universities such as Durham and Bristol state that they will make lower 'contextual' offers after considering an applicant's background (University of Bristol, 2020; Durham University, 2020), notably Oxford and Cambridge do not currently offer an adjusted grade offer. Both Oxford and Cambridge state that they use contextual data on applicants' backgrounds in the admissions process, but Oxford states that students must still be 'predicted to achieve the standard conditional offer for the course', and Cambridge states that they do not use contextual data to 'systematically make conditional offers at lower grades' (University of Oxford, 2020; University of Cambridge, 2020).

The two universities make use of broadly similar contextual data, with a few key differences. On an individual level, both incorporate data regarding whether an

applicant has spent time in care, although Cambridge also accounts for whether an applicant is eligible for free school meals (Oxford accounts for this on a school – level). At the area-level, both institutions use the POLAR4 indicator that measures participation in higher education in the area. Oxford uses the ACORN indicator to measure socio-economic disadvantage in an area, while Cambridge uses the IMD indicator (Indices of Multiple Deprivation) instead. At a school level, both use data about the school's average level of academic attainment, although Oxford uses data about the percentage of students eligible for free school meals at the school, and Cambridge uses information about the regularity with which their school sends successful applicants to Oxbridge. Both universities note data regarding an applicant's participation in widening participation programmes or outreach activities (University of Oxford, 2020; University of Cambridge, 2020).

There are important critiques of how contextual admissions is defined and implemented. Fundamentally, scholars have questioned some of the metrics used to approximate disadvantage, particularly group-level indices of disadvantage such as ACORN and POLAR4. Robson (2019) argued that these measures should be de-emphasised as they have been shown to yield both 'false positive and negative' results when used by admissions tutors at Oxford.

Further, there are debates about how contextual data is used, and what happens after an application is 'flagged' in this way. Writing in *The Guardian*, Marchella Ward, Tinsley Outreach Fellow at Worcester College, Oxford, outlined how her college re-examined the interview as an assessment tool and reformed their criteria for what constitutes excellent performance, with an awareness of how students' backgrounds can shape their performance in the interview setting. In an effort to 'uncouple privilege from the assessment of potential', Ward writes that admissions tutors 'interrogated our own and each others' assumptions about different forms potential might take in an applicant, and asked our admitting tutors to come together for a conversation about how to use contextual data to recognise diverse potential' (Ward, 2019).

Finally, there are debates about to what extent universities should modify their standard grade offers for candidates experiencing educational disadvantage. As outlined previously, while some universities (such as Durham, Bristol, and others), make lower offers to candidates, acknowledging the disparity in resources, information, and support, notably Oxford and Cambridge do not offer reduced grade

offers. The universities emphasise concerns about lowering attainment standards, within a culture where academic excellence is paramount (O'Sullivan, Byrne, et al., 2019).

It is unclear how the many different metrics of disadvantage are weighted, and there are concerns that sufficient attention be paid to school-level and individual-level data. Additional metrics would be helpful to better illuminate facets of disadvantage that are obscured by the current data gathered. For instance, data on the regularity with which the school sends successful applicants to not only Oxford and Cambridge (only Cambridge gathers this information at present), but also to Russell Group universities would help to inform a more holistic picture of university matriculation patterns at the school. Further, more sophisticated data regarding students' parents and family backgrounds would be helpful in order to better understand the information and resources available to them as they prepare for higher education. These could include: parents' highest level of schooling completed, including from which universities if applicable; household income; and O'Sullivan, Byrne, et al. (2019) suggest adding 'lone parenthood' as an indicator of educational disadvantage. This kind of data would supplement information about a student's school to better understand their overall familiarity with higher education, and the kinds of experiences they have had access to outside of school.

Foundation year programmes at elite UK universities

Another widening participation initiative which UK universities utilise is the provision of foundation year programmes. These programmes are designed for students who do not meet the standard entry requirements for their chosen course. Typically, these are free one-year programmes for students post-A Level, but before they begin their first year of university. They offer subject-specific instruction, but also seek to provide other kinds of social support to students—including fostering confidence and a sense of belonging in their new environment, and building supportive relationships with a cohort of diverse peers (O'Sullivan, Bird, et al., 2019). Students at elite schools already benefit from such a suite of supports, as this thesis outlines, which advantages them as they move through the applications process. Foundation years are a valuable means by which universities are working to address some of the effects of educational inequality.

O'Sullivan, Bird, et al.'s (2019) research with students from disadvantaged backgrounds at Oxford in the UK and Trinity College Dublin in Ireland indicated that students who participated in foundation years found their 'sense of belonging significantly increased' over the course of the year. However, students who were admitted via contextual admissions and did not participate in a foundation year saw their 'sense of belonging' remain the same over the course of their first year at university, and these students reported 'feeling different and isolated' (p. 554). This highlights the need to supplement contextual admissions policies with other programmes such as foundation years.

Although other Russell Group universities had already established foundation courses (e.g. Durham, Cardiff), in 2016 Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford initiated the first such programme at Oxford or Cambridge. Following the early success of the program, in 2019 the University of Oxford announced the creation of two programs designed to widen access to under-represented groups, Opportunity Oxford (to commence in September of academic year 2020-21) and Foundation Oxford (to begin academic year 2022-23). The former is designed for students from under-represented backgrounds, who meet the standard offer for their course, and provides academic and social support a few months before students commence their first-year studies at Oxford. The latter is a standard foundation year programme, as outlined earlier. Cambridge then announced plans to launch a similar foundation year scheme in 2021 (Adams, 2019).

Limits to progress on widening participation

Despite some progress in these areas, in which much more work is needed, there are further areas of inequality regarding the demographics of students attending elite universities, which I will analyse here using the latest demographic data from Oxford. Data published in June 2020 by Oxford 'revealed the continuing dominance of students from London and the south-east, who made up 49% of all those admitted to Oxford between 2017 and 2019'. Just '2.1% came from the north-east and 4.5% from the East Midlands' (Weale, 2020b).

In addition, Oxford's 2020 annual admissions report showed significant variation in state school intake depending on the course. The data shows that UK state students apply disproportionately for the most oversubscribed subjects, and independent school students apply disproportionately for the most undersubscribed

subjects, where 'on average, 38% of state applications between 2017 and 2019 were for five of the most oversubscribed subjects at Oxford (Economics & Management, Medicine, PPE, Law, and Mathematics), compared with 31% of independent applications. In contrast, 20% of independent applications were for five of the least oversubscribed subjects (Classics, Music, Modern Languages, Chemistry, and English), compared with 13% of state applications' (University of Oxford, p. 17).

Despite some progress in increasing representation of Black undergraduates, the global Black Lives Matter movement has highlighted systemic racism at elite universities that is a serious barrier to equity (Weale, 2020a). Further, it is important to highlight that there is significant variation among courses and colleges at Oxford in terms of Black students' representation. A recent *Guardian* article highlighted data from Oxford's annual admissions report, and revealed that 'between 2017 and 2019, 12 of Oxford's colleges admitted five or fewer black undergraduates and, over the same period, there were five or fewer black undergraduates on 13 of Oxford's most popular courses. None were admitted to study geography and only one for biology', for instance (Weale, 2020b).

Educational inequality and COVID-19

The COVID-19 global health pandemic exacerbated existing educational inequality. It is not within the scope of this thesis to detail the effect that the pandemic has had on socio-economic and racial inequality thus far, therefore I will focus here on how the pandemic has affected schooling and examinations. During the first few months of the pandemic when schools moved from in-person to exclusively remote learning provision (with the exception of children of key workers), private schools had more resources to be able to offer more robust online learning than many of their state school counterparts. This disparity further advantaged students from already privileged backgrounds.

Further, the pandemic led to the cancellation of A Level examinations in the summer of 2020. Students' grades were to be based instead on predicted grades issued by teachers, which would then be moderated to prevent grade inflation. The algorithm designed by the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) to combat grade inflation sparked a national controversy. It was found to advantage applicants from private schools, due to how it weighted small cohort sizes. It also factored in a school's past performance, which disadvantaged applicants from

historically low-performing schools. When students' grades were either inflated or downgraded along lines that emphasised existing forms of inequality, causing students to miss out on university places, there was a mass outcry and legal action was initiated. In response, and with the support of the Government, the algorithm was eventually retracted and the original, unmoderated, predicted grades were used to determine university places.

The events were a scathing reminder of existing educational inequality amongst sixth form students based on the type of school they attend (Adams & McIntyre, 2020). The scandal cast light on other ways that sixth formers at private schools are advantaged, including a propensity for private school teachers to inflate predicted grades. In June 2020 *The Guardian* reported, based on internal documents at the elite Sevenoaks School in Kent, that the 'higher education department seeks to increase about 1 in 12 pupils' grades each year' in order to help them secure university offers, and that the policy has been in place for 'many years', clearly predating the pandemic (Bland, 2020).

Potential futures

As widening participation initiatives move into a new decade, universities must more effectively recognise intersectional inequality, that is, how race, class, gender, and other social categories interact with one another to produce disadvantage. For example, while much attention has been placed on access to elite universities for students from low-income backgrounds, more attention must be paid to the specific challenges faced by students from low-income backgrounds and BAME backgrounds. In this vein, Oxford and Cambridge have begun to collaborate with the organisation Target Oxbridge (Oxford since 2016 and Cambridge since 2017), which works with BAME students to support their applications to the ancient universities.

Some academics and policy leaders have called for a radical reconfiguration of higher education admissions (Hermann, 2020; McKie, 2018). These reforms include: moving to a system of applications after results, to circumvent issues around disparities in predicted grades where private schools are known to inflate these; and eliminating personal statements as part of the application, recognising that privileged students often have a larger arsenal of experiences to cite in these, and receive more coaching on how to write them. Some leaders have even called for admissions to

Oxford and Cambridge universities to be completed by lottery, for students who have passed a particular grade threshold. They argue that this would help neutralise the ways that privileged students are able to use the personal statement, interview, and other aspects of the application to their advantage (McKie, 2018).

Here I have outlined the multifaceted context of this study, encompassing the historical context of elite schooling, literature on 'meritocracy' and the notion of a 'meritocratic' elite, neoliberal frameworks for conceptualising higher education, and current university admissions policies, including efforts to widen participation from diverse underrepresented groups. In the next chapter, I move to discuss the key sociological literature with which the research is in dialogue. This includes the sociological literature on elite schooling, sociological literature on parenting including 'concerted cultivation' parenting practices, and how these intersect with university admissions.

Chapter 3: Literature review

Overview

This chapter reviews the key sociological literature with which this study is in dialogue. First, foundational work in the sociology of elite schooling is discussed. Second, a focus on Bourdieusian inspired ethnographic work in this field is outlined, with attention to the role of elite secondary schools in the reproduction of privilege and implications for elite university admissions. Third, the role of parenting in enabling schooling success is discussed. Fourth, I move to a discussion of Lareau's (2011) concept of 'concerted cultivation', which Lareau uses to explain middle-class parents' approaches to child-rearing, which in turn facilitate students' successful movement through the educational system. I show how this concept is a fruitful analytical starting point from which to theorise how parents, as well as other actors including the elite school, its students, and private tutors engage with the university admissions process, whilst also discussing critiques of the concept. I discuss the emerging tradition of 'concerted cultivation' scholarship, including work that emphasises the complexity of parental experiences, and processes of 'negotiation' in the context of securing advantages in educational institutions.

I then draw on the small body of literature that analyses how parents of elite school students engage with the university admissions process, and point to the theoretical and empirical gaps in this work. Next I discuss authors who have deployed the concept of 'concerted cultivation' in educational settings in limited ways. I argue for a new conceptualisation of 'cultivation in concert', attending to the complex and nuanced collective work of multiple actors. Finally, I analyse literature that examines the rationales that underpin parents' enactment of 'concerted cultivation' work.

Elite schools and educational advantage

C. Wright Mills' (1956) analysis of how elite US boarding schools socialised their pupils into membership in the country's elite, propelling them into positions of power and influence in society, laid an important foundation for subsequent sociological studies of elite schooling. Building on this work, Wakeford (1969) and Cookson and Persell (1985) conceptualised elite boarding schools (in English and

American contexts, respectively) as 'total institutions' (Goffman, 1961), where pupils led a 'cloistered' (Wakeford, 1969) life set apart from the rest of society, subjected to particular formal regulations and rituals that bonded them together and socialised them into a sense of being a collective elite group. These studies speak most closely to the dynamics of residential schools, which are able to exert influence over more facets of a pupil's life than day schools. Walford (2006) drew attention to a wider range of private schools in the UK context, moving beyond the all-male boarding school as the central focus of analysis, and illuminating the growing diversity of the sector, encompassing girls' schools, smaller schools, and faith-based schools, for example.

In the period following the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, a renewed, more urgent resurgence in interest in studying elites in general emerged within sociology (Savage & Williams, 2008). Attention was paid to ways in which the elite was adapting to a globalised, and allegedly more porous and egalitarian society (Savage, 2015). Increasing ethnographic work on elite secondary schooling emerged during this period (for example, Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan, 2011), drawing on the theories of Bourdieu in particular to conceptualise how privilege is reproduced in elite institutions (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). This body of work with a Bourdieusian lens has grown over the last decade, attending to elite schooling in changing globalising contexts and with particular attention to elite girls' schools as sites of study (Fahey, 2014; Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Kenway, Langmead & Epstein, 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014). This thesis is most closely in dialogue with this more recent ethnographic work on elite schooling, and I will provide an analysis of this work in more depth in this chapter.

As these accounts are influenced by Bourdieu's work on social reproduction, it is important to briefly outline these conceptual tools here. Bourdieu developed multiple concepts that work together, including the foundational concepts of habitus, capital, and field, but also doxa among other concepts (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Following a Bourdieusian framework, an actor's practice is shaped by 'interactions between one's disposition (habitus) and one's relative position in the field, which depends on the form and amount of capitals one can summon. To be effective, the forms of capital have to be recognised as valuable within the particular social arena under consideration' (Vincent et al., 2012, p. 341). As Reay (2004) noted, habitus shapes what is considered normal and desirable.

Drawing heavily on Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'capitals', studies of elite schooling have shown how these schools facilitate the reproduction of privilege by fostering particular kinds of dispositions, (or a 'habitus') and mobilising social and cultural resources or 'capitals' (in addition to more obvious economic resources) that advantage their students (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). While most studies do not make the link explicit, these dispositions and resources advantage students in concrete ways in the process of elite university admissions. For example, Forbes and Maxwell's (2019) study of an elite girls' school in Scotland analysed how students at the school were resourced to move towards privileged futures through an 'institutional habitus' that developed dispositions that included 'emphasis on [personal] agency', positive affective relations with others, and a reflexive practice that emphasised 'being resilient' (p. 170). They presented a largely seamless account of the students as 'grounded in a strong self-belief and high levels of self-esteem, a confidence and sense of efficacy about the self and the future – a positive agentic self' (p. 167).

In a similar study, Forbes and Lingard (2015) argued that students are 'confident, assured, and exceedingly optimistic', exhibiting what they term 'assured optimism'. Moreover, in a study of young women at four different elite independent schools in England, Maxwell and Aggleton (2013b) found 'effortless' and enjoyable accomplishment among the students (p. 86), and emphasised students' senses of 'surety' about their futures, which they described as including 'possessing a strong sense of affinity with and connectedness to other families and to the school attended; and/or having confidence about future educational and employment success' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014, p. 194).

Working in the context of a New England boarding school in the US, Khan (2011) found that students learned a sense of 'ease' through their experience at the elite school, and argued that such 'ease' shaped how they were able to deftly negotiate power hierarchies (a point to which I will return later in this chapter). Working in a similar context, Gaztambide-Fernandez et al. (2013) went further to suggest that through participation in the elite school students learn a sense of entitlement.

Some work has foregrounded the experiences of the 'other' in the context of the elite school to illustrate some students' experiences of dissonance vis a vis the social reproduction work of the school (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013; Khan, 2011). Forbes and Maxwell (2019) presented counter-narratives to the dominant disposition

of the 'positive agentic self' by briefly referencing working-class students and a student with special needs, in this case, autism (p. 171). These students, through their class background, or through their special educational needs, are non-normative students at the school, outsiders in contrast to normative insiders. In the US context, there has been greater attention to the role of race as well as class and the ways that these students do not conform to dominant dispositions in the school—students who Gaztambide-Fernandez et al. (2013) described as 'affect aliens'. Khan (2011) also analysed the ways that these students experience a sense of dislocation in the context of the elite school.

Notably neglected, however, are the accounts of 'normative' students who struggle within the context of the elite school—for instance, students who come from affluent homes, are ethnically White, and who are high-achieving academically yet do not possess the ease, efficacy, and sense of self discussed above. Maxwell and Aggleton's (2014) study is notable within the literature on elite schooling in that it offered examples of students who were class 'insiders', yet did not exhibit the same positive affective dispositions as other affluent students at the school. They offered cases of two affluent students who did not exhibit levels of 'surety' that the authors argued were normative at the school. However, while fruitful, the work did not offer sufficient engagement with the contours of students' lived experiences, and its findings remained somewhat superficial. The study focused on students' abstract future imaginaries, rather than the concrete, everyday negotiation of the activities that constitute university preparation.

Working within this gap, this thesis theorises affluent, White Trinity School students' varied affective repertoires, making space for repertoires that are far less 'positive', and how these shape the ways in which they are able to negotiate the university admissions process. Some studies pointed to more negative affective repertoires among girls who are race and class 'insiders' at the school, however, they border on caricature in their depiction of the girls. These accounts foreground the girls' insecurity, fear of failure, and neuroticism (Kenway et al., 2015). Drawing on data from two elite girls' schools, one in England and one in South Africa, Kenway et al. (2015) put forward a picture of the 'A1 girl', a concept adapted from McRobbie's (2009) feminist work. The 'A1 girl' excels in all areas of school life—academically, socially, and in extra-curricular achievements. She always 'shine[s]' and is always the 'best' (Kenway et al., 2015, p. 159–160). Kenway et al. argue that girls see this ideal

as something they must strive towards, producing 'perfectionistic' attitudes, a sense of crushing pressure, and behaviour that leads to burnout (Kenway et al., 2015, p. 159–160). They argued that 'failure phobia' is pervasive (p. 159) and emphasised the girls' sense of insecurity.

A persistent problem in scholarly analyses of privately educated young women is the tendency towards generalisations about the students. My study creates space for more nuanced accounts of the girls' lived experiences than these, by focusing on the concrete contours of the university applications' process rather than the girls' more abstract imaginaries.

Implications for elite university admissions

Whilst Forbes and Maxwell's (2019) work argued that the students' 'affective social capital relations with friends and other members of the [school] community (current and past pupils, family networks using the school and so forth)' were important resources from which students were able to draw, their analyses offered limited insight into the fine-grained contours of what these actual processes looked like, including their implications for university admissions. The same is true of other accounts of elite school students' sense of belonging and connection with others in the community of the school (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan 2011). Clear connections are not made between this and the fostering of a sense of belonging and connection with regard to elite universities, universities which many school alumni go on to attend and which many teachers have also attended.

Further, very few studies focus on the intellectual, as well as the social, practices of the elite school, although Khan (2011) and Forbes and Lingard (2015) are notable exceptions. Khan (2011) pointed to the academic and intellectual facet of what he asserted is the 'ease' of privilege that the school helps inculcate in their pupils—that is, a comfort level with 'think[ing] big' (p. 160). He outlined the school's pedagogical 'audacity', as the humanities curriculum encouraged students to engage with ambitious philosophical, interdisciplinary questions. He showed how teachers encouraged students to produce independent research, and to conceptualise themselves as capable of making original contributions to their respective fields of interest with this research. Classes were structured in the form of small seminars where discussion was often led by the students.

Forbes and Lingard (2015) pointed to a specific kind of 'social and cultural capital stocks' that they argued are fortified in the context of the school—that is, 'capacities for participation in research' (p. 132). They outlined how the school curriculum 'centrally privileges understanding of research and knowledge production and exchange' (p. 131), and how 'independent creative thinking' and 'informed communication, exchange, and debate are intellectual-social norms at the school' (p. 132). Particular practices such as 'intellectual curiosity and a questioning disposition' are 'highly regarded', they argued (p. 131). However, in its emphasis on stocks of 'social and cultural capital', the analysis suffers from a sense that these processes are static rather than active, that these are stockpiles of resources, rather than dispositions that are actively fostered in students and consciously shaped. In turn, the account suffers from a lack of empirical detail regarding how these practices are enacted.

Neither Khan's concept of the 'ease' of privilege, nor Forbes and Lingard's (2015) conceptualisation of the school's 'social and cultural capital stocks' adequately theorise a process that is both effortful and active, and neither make explicit how these capacities that the school develops in students crucially move them in particularly directed ways towards elite university admissions.

Further, there is a lack of attention in the elite schooling literature to the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools work to systematically secure advantage for their students in the context of elite university admissions. Ways that the elite school seeks to maximise admissions success for the collective year group is, however, discussed by Khan (2011), working in the specific context of US university admissions. Khan argued that the school's university admissions counsellors fostered collegial relationships with elite university admissions officers, and used these relationships to strategically emphasise specific students' interest in certain universities, with the implicit promise that if accepted, they would attend. (This practice is advantageous for admissions officers, as the university's 'yield', or percentage of students admitted who attend, is a key metric in national university rankings.) However, notably Khan depicted this work as a seamless, frictionless process, and his account does not include the perspectives of students and parents on this process.

It is important to note that although not grounded in research within elite schools themselves, Boliver (2013, p. 359) hypothesised and Green and Kynaston (2019, p. 107) later argued that private schools in the UK are likely to predict grades

that qualify their students to be competitive candidates for entrance to Russell Group universities. Green and Kynaston (2019) asserted that these grades are 'advantageously optimistic' (ibid.). While Green and Kynaston offer a fruitful, macro-level historical and policy analysis of how private schools have been able to perpetuate advantage in Britain, the scope of their study did not permit fine-grained detail regarding how these processes are worked out by students, teachers, and parents at elite schools themselves.

The role of parents

Methodologically, it is important to note that much of this empirical work draws principally on data from either faculty at the school (Forbes & Maxwell, 2019), students (Fahey, 2014), or in some cases both students and faculty (Forbes & Lingard, 2015). Moreover, there is a lack of empirical work on parents, or analyses of all three actors—school, students, and parents in depth. Weis et al.'s (2014) study is a notable exception to this, where the authors are working in an American context.

In particular, whilst other studies have emphasised the role of family and the 'home' in shaping student trajectories, crucially parents themselves have not participated in the research (Fahey, 2014; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014). For example, Fahey's (2014) ethnographic study of young women at two elite schools, one in England and one in India, examined students' future aspirations, including higher education and career trajectories, through in-depth interviews and focus groups. Whilst the young women discussed parental expectations in particular regarding the pursuit of secondary schooling, higher education, and work, the research relied exclusively on young people's accounts. Notably, the influence of parents was only examined through what young people said about this influence.

Maxwell and Aggleton's (2014) study employed an analytic model of 'home, school, and the self' as domains which shaped 'orientations and practices' (p. 193), although analysis of these three domains was limited by the methods the study employed. Their analysis of the 'home' was limited to demographic information about parental occupation and residence, and young women's narratives about why a particular secondary school was chosen for them, and what they perceived family expectations and influences to be. Whilst the perspective of young people is important in its own right, the only narratives about the 'home' are from their perspective, as

parents are not interviewed. Parents' voices are conspicuously absent, which diminishes the richness of the picture that can be painted of the 'home' sphere. Further, the depth and richness of Maxwell and Aggleton's account of the 'school' sphere is limited by the fact that the study was spread over four different schools, where observational research was conducted at each of the schools over a very short period of a few days each.

The lack of research on parents of students at elite schools is no doubt influenced by the challenges of securing access (discussed in Chapter 4). Further, where many studies have taken the school or its students as a focal point and then used a multi-sited research approach (Fahey, 2014; Kenway et al., 2015; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014), this research takes a single school site as its focus and within that develops a fine-grained analysis of how the school, its students, and their parents collectively negotiate university admissions.

Points of departure

In sum, the elite schooling literature offers fruitful points of departure for the analyses in this thesis, but there are three keys gaps in the extant work to date, which this thesis will address. First, there is a lack of attention to varied dispositions and experiences amongst students at the school who are part of dominant racial and class categories (i.e. White and affluent). These students are presented as a largely homogenous group, who enjoy similar levels of confidence, agency, and senses of entitlement.

Second, a persistent issue with theorisations of the reproduction of privilege that rely heavily on Bourdieusian frameworks of 'habitus' and 'capitals' is that these studies do not pay sufficient attention to the concrete contours of the university admissions process and how these are negotiated at a fine-grained, everyday level. Analyses have tended to focus on the realm of the students' abstract future aspirations (Fahey, 2014; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014), or affective dispositions that are likely to advantage them (Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Gaztambide-Fernandez et al., 2013; Khan, 2011), without attention to how this potential is worked out and realised on-the-ground in the everyday negotiation of the university admissions process. To address this gap, this thesis is instead focused upon the actions and practices that students (and parents and the school) carry out during this process.

Third, the role of parents is notably neglected in these accounts, discussed further in the section below, and there is a need for more empirical and theoretical attention to how multiple actors—school, students, and parents—work together in relationship with one another in the course of university admissions. Taken together, these areas will be addressed in this thesis in order to do justice to the complexity and nuance of how privilege is reproduced in the context of elite schools vis a vis the university admissions process.

Parenting as enabling schooling success

The past two decades have seen a rise in interest in the sociology of parenting. Much of this work has centred on the experiences of middle-class parents, and has often examined how they engage with state-funded schools that their children attend in order to facilitate their children's educational success. This work depicts the reproduction of privilege as uncertain, which must be worked at in on-going, effortful interactions with children's schooling (Ball, 2003; Calarco, 2018; Reay, 2007). Much of the literature is framed through a Bourdieusian lens of possession and activation of various forms of 'capital' that confer advantages upon their children as they move through the educational system. In particular, this work has tended to focus on key decision-making junctures in students' educational trajectories, such as decisions about which schools to attend or to which universities students will apply (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2007).

However, there is a need for more work that examines the most affluent parents in society, and how they interact with elite independent schools in which their children are enrolled. In addition, in contrast to work that has emphasised how families navigate distinct decision-making processes at certain educational milestones (Ball, 2003; Reay, 2007), this thesis analyses how parents engage with the concrete contours of the university admissions process which takes place over the course of more than a year, in order to shed important light on how privilege is negotiated in the everyday lives of sixth form students.

Throughout, the extant literature has emphasised the work of facilitating students' educational success as primarily the work of mothers. Hays' (1996) work introduced a conceptualisation of 'intensive mothering', pointing to the gendered nature of parenting labour. From early childhood (Vincent, 2017) and even through to

their children's university years (Hamilton, 2016), middle-class mothers are depicted as taking a demanding and active role in ensuring educational success for their children (Ball, 2003; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2007; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014). In dialogue with this work, the research that underpins this thesis focused primarily on the experiences of mothers.

In order to theorise how parents, (as well as other actors including the elite school, its students, and private tutors, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter) engage with the concrete contours of the university admissions process, this thesis builds upon Lareau's concept of 'concerted cultivation' and takes it as an analytical starting point to form the framework that will be outlined later in this chapter.

Lareau's 'concerted cultivation'

American sociologist Annette Lareau has researched the intersection of family life and educational institutions extensively over the course of her career. She has often applied a comparative frame to analyse the approaches of working-class and middle-class parents, and elucidated how middle-class parents are able to confer advantages upon their children in the educational system (Lareau, 2000; Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Goyette, 2014). Her work provides a fruitful analytical starting point for a number of reasons. Importantly, her ethnographic work is deeply attuned to how privilege is manifested at an everyday level in the concrete contours of families' lives. Further, she pays attention to processes of connectedness and linkages between actors—in the case of her work to date—the family and the school. I will outline her concept of 'concerted cultivation' here, and show how it provides an important conceptual frame from which I build my analysis. I move the concept forward to also frame analyses of other actors in the university admissions process besides parents—including those of students, and those of the elite school itself.

In her monograph *Unequal Childhoods* (2011), Lareau analysed parenting and family life across social classes, including how parents interact with schools. Based on ethnographic research with working-class and middle-class families in the US, Lareau identified 'concerted cultivation' as a middle-class approach to childrearing where parents seek to actively shape their children in a range of ways. These included: time devoted to structured extra-curricular activities for children, language

use in the home that encourages strategic reasoning and negotiation with adult authority figures, and parents' monitoring of and interventions in their children's institutional lives at school. She identified how parents draw on their own repertoires of economic, social, and cultural resources in order to shape their children in these particular ways. She also argued that this approach to parenting in turn often facilitates students' successful movement through the educational system, and that it often fosters a concomitant sense of entitlement in the children.

Lareau contrasted a middle-class 'concerted cultivation' approach to parenting with the 'accomplishment of natural growth', which she observed in working-class families. She found that in these families children had largely unstructured time to play, adults' language use with children emphasised directives and discouraged negotiation, and parents were less likely to intervene in their children's institutional lives at school—and when they did so their efforts were less likely to be effective.

It is important to acknowledge that Lareau is also deeply aware of the moral judgments that often accompany work on parents and families. She carefully and repeatedly noted in her work that neither approach is better than the other from an ethical or moral standpoint, and she deliberately pointed to many of the disadvantages of a 'concerted cultivation' approach. However, she does note that a middle-class 'concerted cultivation' approach matches the dispositions of mostly middle-class teachers in schools (and I would argue, university faculty making higher education admissions decisions), which shapes the school context with which parents and students are in dialogue. In part as a result of this match, students from homes where parents employ 'concerted cultivation' experience advantages in the school setting.

Although Lareau does not explicitly present her work within a Bourdieusian framework, she acknowledges that 'concerted cultivation' and the 'accomplishment of natural growth' can be viewed as 'aspects of the habitus of the families' (ibid., p. 362), citing Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'. She also notes that the middle-class families both possess, and activate, various forms of 'capital' that advantage their children.

Lareau (2011) asserted that 'concerted cultivation' and the 'accomplishment of natural growth' represent a set of internalised dispositions that parents possess and then their children learn (p. 362). However, whilst she identifies these as dispositions, the focus of her work is on the concrete actions that proceed from these respective dispositions. For Lareau, 'concerted cultivation' and the 'accomplishment of natural

growth' are 'pattern[s] of practices or strategies attached in various ways to class cultures' (p. 64). In this way, she built on Bourdieu's work, taking it further than 'dispositions' and 'ways of thinking' (Stich & Cipollone, 2019), but instead emphasised and illuminated actions in the world. Other scholars who have drawn on the concept of 'concerted cultivation' adopted a similar focus, with a growing body of literature that illuminated these actions and that analysed 'concerted cultivation strategies'(Yemini et al., 2019) or 'cultivation practices' (Maxwell & Yemini, 2019) deployed by middle-class parents. In this thesis I use the term 'concerted cultivation work' as a more general term to encompass the variations of 'concerted cultivation', such as 'strategies' and 'practices' used by authors working in this area.

As a theorist, Lareau offers a very practical framework for analysing different approaches to parenting and family life. Her work marks a significant contribution to illuminating how social reproduction is enacted through concrete actions at an everyday level. Indeed, Lareau's concepts of 'concerted cultivation' and 'natural growth' are grounded in the practical and "messy" language of gardening. Lareau says of her work, 'It's meant to be a gardening analogy. Concerted cultivation is like raising a plant in a hothouse, where you're constantly pruning and tinkering with the soil; natural growth is what happens when you put the plant in a nice corner of the yard where it gets rain and sun and you do not fuss with it so much' (Heller, 2019).

She acknowledges the culturally salient term 'helicopter parenting', found in popular literature and media narratives, but also notes that 'the term helicopter parenting misses a key aspect of the dynamic. It presumes that parents are hovering over children. But really they're trying to pull things out of their kids, constantly pruning and probing and looking for little ways they can intervene to help them grow'. To emphasise this dynamic, she employs the term 'concerted cultivation', and points to practical examples of this 'pruning and probing' at work, noting that 'when middle-class kids run into an obstacle, their parents will step in and hire a tutor or therapist or college counselor to get them back on track. But for poor and working-class adolescents, a single pothole can throw them off entirely' (ibid.).

While Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'capitals' are used ubiquitously in the sociological literatures of parenting and of elite schooling, and Lareau acknowledges how she draws upon these in her conceptualisation of 'concerted cultivation', her concept nevertheless marks a fruitful change in emphasis from that of Bourdieu. Much of the work on 'habitus' in the context of families, students, and

schools depicts one's 'habitus' as an automatic, somewhat passive, effortlessly enacted disposition (for example, Forbes & Lingard, 2015). In contrast, through the lens of 'concerted cultivation', Lareau (2011) paints a picture of active, effortful labour on the part of families. Further, Bourdieusian analyses of forms of capital that families possess have too often focused simply on their possession, as static stocks, while Lareau pays attention not only to their possession, but also the extent to which they are actually activated (2011). Finally, while Bourdieusian analyses often frame the reproduction of privilege through an antagonistic lens, where actors compete for advantage in a particular field, through the gardening metaphor that she employs Lareau (2011) emphasises that this 'cultivation' work is relational and, at least in part, grounded in bonds of care between actors.

I will argue in this thesis that this kind of effortful care work is enacted not only by parents, but by the elite school itself, and that 'concerted cultivation' is an important conceptual frame to better understand the actions of multiple actors in the university admissions process. Lareau's primary focus is on the family, and there is little attention paid to the role of the school itself in her study. However, her analytical frame does allows conceptual space for attention to students' agency in these processes as they negotiate their journeys—she discusses the sense of entitlement that a 'concerted cultivation' approach often produces in students, although her account lacks detailed attention to the perspective of students themselves. In contrast, the research that underpins this thesis focuses upon multiple actors—parents, students, and school, and the relationships between them as they negotiate university admissions.

Where 'concerted cultivation' is 'the active fostering of children's talents and skills' (Lareau & Weininger 2008, p. 120), Lareau uses the term 'concerted' to connote effortful action. However, an additional meaning of 'concerted' offers fertile conceptual ground on which to build to analyse the complex ways in which the university admissions process is negotiated. A neglected second meaning of the term 'concerted'—that is the extant to which actors are united in action or purpose—facilitates analysis of the extent to which multiple actors are working 'in concert'. This allows for an analysis of complexity and nuance in understandings of elite schooling and affluent parenting.

'Concerted cultivation' and negotiating university admissions

The research that formed the basis of *Unequal Childhoods* (2011) centred on families with nine and ten year-old children, and was carried out in the early 1990s, with the first edition of the monograph published in 2003. That same year, Lareau conducted follow-up interviews with students and their parents (now approximately ten years after the initial study), when students were nineteen to twenty-one years old, to be included in the second edition of the book, ultimately published in 2011. Based on the research, Lareau and Weininger (2008) noted that 'differences in parental involvement in the transition out of high [secondary] school appear to be an extension of the child rearing styles used when the children were much younger'. They pointed to middle-class parents' intensive and involved participation in the university applications process, which they argued 'reflects an orientation to 'concerted cultivation'—that is, to the active fostering of children's talents and skills' (p.120). They argued that while working-class and low-income parents viewed the provision of university applications assistance as the 'responsibility of "the school"', in contrast middle-class parents conceptualised the process as a 'familial one', where parents worked to monitor, manage, and organise the process to a much greater extent (p.119).

Lareau (2011) found that middle-class parents, especially mothers, 'appeared to embrace the idea that it was their responsibility to carefully manage every step of their children's transition' to university. They gathered information about the universities their children were considering, watched closely for potential pitfalls, and sometimes intervened in the process (p. 287). She described how parents accompanied their children on visits to universities. Some paid for private tuition for the SAT entrance examination and in specific academic subjects where they perceived the student needed more support (p. 295).

Lareau and Cox (2011) identified how middle-class parents of these young adults put class-based cultural resources to work to aid students as they negotiated the university admissions process in their final years of secondary school. These resources included: information about institutions (in this case, secondary schools) and how they work, specific information about their child's particular "case" within an institution (such as their strengths and weaknesses), and a propensity to intervene in institutions and a belief that intervention is appropriate. Parents then used these

resources to anticipate and solve problems in their child's journey through their final years of secondary school.

Some subsequent studies drawing on Lareau's framework of 'concerted cultivation' and the 'accomplishment of natural growth' have argued that 'concerted cultivation' is found across all classes, and that parents' socio-economic position shapes their ability to actualise their desired mode of parenting. For example, low-income parents struggle to afford expensive extra-curricular enrichment activities (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

However, these studies tend to centre on very young, preschool aged children. As students approach university, parents who have been to university themselves will have more specific knowledge and resources available with which to guide their children, compared to parents who have no experience of higher education. Indeed studies show how middle-class students are able to draw not only upon their parents' knowledge, but wider social networks of friends and family members as well as teachers who have immediate knowledge of elite universities, and can offer valuable direction-finding information (Ball, 2003; Lareau, 2011; Weis et al., 2014).

Lareau's account of 'concerted cultivation' at work in the context of university admissions provides an important foundation for the findings that will be presented in this thesis, however, her work leaves crucial gaps in our understanding of the process that this thesis addresses. As previously stated, Lareau's analytical lens is directed firmly at parents, with comparatively little attention to the role of the school and the role of students themselves in negotiating university admissions. As a result, there is little empirical or theoretical attention paid to the extent that multiple actors work together to secure particular university outcomes, as well as points of tension or contradictions among actors. This thesis works within this gap. Finally, Lareau's focus is on middle-class parents of students at a suburban state school outside of a small American city, whereas my focus is on a more elite group in the context of an elite fee-paying school that is highly academically selective and located in London, one of the world's global financial centres.

Critiques

Important critiques of Lareau's (2011) work highlighted her lack of attention to intersectionality, that is, how multiple identities including race and gender intersect with class to shape how individuals are positioned in and experience the world (Crenshaw, 1991; Vincent, 2017). Indeed, Lareau's conclusions minimised differences along racial lines between families of similar class backgrounds. Significant recent studies have been carried out in the UK (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Vincent et al., 2012; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Vincent, 2017;) and US contexts (Delale O'Connor, 2019; Manning, 2019) to work to address this gap. Notably, Manning (2019) presented a re-reading or re-analysis of selected ethnographic material from *Unequal Childhoods* (2011) and identified how the Black families in the study 'cultivate racial knowledge and skills in their children', arguing that these parenting practices represent a form of 'concerted cultivation', but one that is explicitly racialised.

Other work called attention to a varied and diverse picture of 'concerted cultivation' parenting practices. Vincent, Rollock, Ball and Gillborn's (2012) study of Black middle-class parents in the UK drew entirely on participants of Black Caribbean heritage who held professional occupations. Grounded in critical race theory, the findings analysed how systemic racism in majority-White schools inhibited Black middle-class parents' abilities to activate the capitals they possessed. The authors pointed to variation amongst this group, in terms of the different degrees to which they possessed and could activate capitals.

Other recent work has called attention to the experiences of middle-class mothers with disabilities enacting 'concerted cultivation', as they face 'accessibility barriers' and 'social exclusion' as they engage with their children's schools and organised extra-curricular activities. This work highlighted how the logic of 'concerted cultivation' 'presumes a nondisabled identity' (Frederick, 2018).

Other scholars have critiqued Lareau's framework for its broad assertions about parenting practices by class categories: middle class, and working class and poor, without sufficient attention to diversity and variation within classes, in some cases even when racial categories are held constant across the class groupings (e.g. variation across the white middle-class, for example). Important work has indeed highlighted variation in parenting practices across class categories (Frederick, 2018).

Wheeler's (2018) analysis of mostly White (with a few parents of Asian descent) middle-class families in a 'small city in the north-west of England', across three different class 'fractions' which she identifies as 'lower-middle-class', 'mid-middle-class', and 'upper-middle-class' found that the extent to which parents employed 'concerted cultivation' parenting practices was 'gradational', where the upper-middle-class 'cultivate[ed] more intensively' than the mid-middle-class, which did so more intensively than the lower-middle-class.

An emerging tradition of 'concerted cultivation' scholarship: how parents make choices about their actions

Lareau's (2011) conceptualisation of 'concerted cultivation' did not explore how research participants actively make choices, and reflect on and make sense of these actions and choices. An emerging body of work that builds on Lareau (2011) actively seeks to do this, including explorations of ethical and affective tensions within the individual. This thesis is in dialogue with this work, where in Chapter 6 I explore parents' choices about the extent to which they intervene in the university admissions process for their children, and analyse how the affective dimension impacts to what extent students adopt 'concerted cultivation' practices themselves.

Moreover, Perrier's (2013) study, composed of White British mothers of young pre-school-aged children drawn from both working-class and middle-class backgrounds analysed the 'ways in which middle-class mothers negotiate discourses of good mothering to produce moral maternal selves'. She pointed to some 'middle-class mothers' ambivalence about concerted cultivation as well as their fears about the excesses of the middle-class emphasis on education' to suggest 'ways in which the study of class and parenting might reflect more complexity and diversity' (p. 667).

Perrier critiqued analyses that only presented middle-class parents 'as capital bearing and transmitting individuals'. She showed how these accounts did not allow space for 'the complexity and messiness' of how these mothers negotiated discourses around being a 'good' mother'. She identified how some middle-class mothers resisted 'concerted cultivation' parenting practices, 'haunted by the spectre of the 'pushy' strategic middle-class mother' with which they did not wish to identify (p. 658). However, it is important to note that all of the mothers were parents of young pre-school-aged children, and it was very possible that their orientations to 'strategic' parenting could change as their children progressed within the educational system.

Working in a different demographic context, Sherman (2019) studied hyper-affluent upper-middle class parents in New York City, with median household incomes of $625,000, reaching as much $10 million in the sample, and estimated median net worth of $3.25 million, reaching as high as $50 million among the participants. Most of the families had children under ten years old (p. 14). Building on Lareau (2011), Sherman developed a framework of 'conflicted cultivation' (2017) where parents sought to construct themselves as 'moral' actors despite possessing significant wealth. They did this by employing practices of 'constraint' in their parenting, curtailing their children's behaviour and consumption in ways that they deemed to be morally worthy. However, she contrasts practices of 'constraint' with strategies of 'expansion', that is parents' desires to expand their children's opportunities and develop their children's selves. When tensions arose between decisions about 'constraint' or 'expansion' in the study, 'expansion' usually won out (ibid.). In this vein, this thesis pays empirical and theoretical attention to why parents do what they do, and in doing so also makes space to conceptualise the variety of parent experiences, as well as the conflicts that they experience in the course of negotiating university admissions.

'Negotiation' and the role of students

As outlined in Chapter 1, the term 'negotiate' is used intentionally in my operative research question—that is, how does a school, its students, and its parents negotiate university admissions? Much of the literature that draws on 'concerted cultivation' has tended to emphasise one particular facet of the three broad kinds of practices Lareau identifies as flowing from a 'concerted cultivation' approach to parenting: that is, time devoted to structured extra-curricular activities and other forms of enrichment and skill development (for example, Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013b; Vincent, 2017; Yemini et al., 2019). Less commonly, scholars have focused on the other two facets Lareau identifies—how parents monitor and intervene in educational institutions to secure advantages for their children, and how children are taught how to communicate and crucially, to negotiate with, adult authority figures (Calarco, 2018; Weis et al., 2014).

It is important to elucidate here that the process of enacting 'concerted cultivation' inherently involves a facility with negotiation of various kinds—of

institutions and of hierarchies in the form of adult authority figures, in order to achieve desired ends. Drawing on 'concerted cultivation', Weis et al. (2014) argued that this approach to childrearing consisted of 'negotiation' with those who have power, particularly in the context of the school (p. 131). With a similar research focus to Lareau, Calarco (2018) framed the advantages that middle-class children possessed in the context of a state-funded primary school in an American suburb as 'negotiated advantages', secured through the students' and parents' requests for extra support from teachers and accommodations from the school. Compared to working-class parents, Calarco showed how middle-class parents were more likely to challenge teachers' authority and advocate for their child to secure accommodations or extra support. In doing so, they actively exerted pressure on the institution.

Fruitfully, Calarco moved the conversation to consider the role not only of parents at certain points of intervention, but the role of students and their teachers too in 'negotiating advantages' in everyday classroom interactions. She identified how requests for extra support in many cases came directly from middle-class students themselves, and argued that accounts that focus on parental intervention do not do justice to young people's own agency.

Building on Calarco's (2018) work, as well as Khan's (2011) conceptualisation of the way that students at an elite boarding school learned to embody 'ease', Taylor (2021) focused on how students confronted institutional hierarchies in the context of an elite boys' school in London. She argued that the school studied possessed a relatively 'flattened' teacher-student hierarchy, which presented opportunities for students to learn how to confidently navigate relationships with authority figures, facilitating a sense of 'ease', which Khan (2011) argued is a mark of privilege. In dialogue with this work that attends to students' own agency and actions, this thesis analyses the role that students (in this case, sixth formers applying to university) play in enacting 'concerted cultivation' work for themselves.

Elite schools and parents negotiating university admissions

There is a small body of literature on parental engagement with elite schools in the context of the university admissions process. This literature draws principally on Bourdieu's concept of various forms of 'capital' that confer advantage in educational institutions. This small body of work makes reference to 'concerted

cultivation', but does not draw on the concept in depth or take it farther (Chiang, 2018; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014). Nevertheless, the work provides important points of departure with which I will be in dialogue, and in this vein I draw on three particularly fruitful studies that I will outline here.

Weis et al. (2014) conducted ethnographic research in the context of three schools, two independent schools and one state school that served an affluent population. However, it is important to note that the context of the study was not as elite as the context for the study that underpins this thesis, as Weis et al.'s (2014) work was situated in a moderately selective independent school in the 'greater metropolitan areas of nonglobal, tier-2 cities in the north-eastern United States' (p. 29), where parents have 'weak linkages to the most highly valued economic, social, and cultural capital in the nation' (p. 86). On the other hand, the parents of Trinity students have strong linkages to these forms of capital, London is certainly a global tier-1 city, and Trinity School is highly academically selective. Van Zanten's (2015) research and Chiang's (2018) study focused on more elite spaces. Van Zanten (2015) focused on the experiences of parents whose children were enrolled in selective university preparation courses in Paris, courses designed to enable students to gain admission to France's most elite universities. Chiang (2018) studied parents of students at two top-performing public high schools in Beijing.

Multiple actors in the university admissions process, and their varied experiences

Weis et al.'s (2014) work stands out however in its fine-grained attention to the role of multiple actors in the university admissions process, whereas Chiang (2018) and Van Zanten (2015) prioritised theorisation of parents. Weis et al.'s (2014) study analysed the actions of parents, the school, and to some degree the students themselves, although the latter was not developed fully. Theoretically, Weis et al. noted that 'concerted cultivation' as a 'childrearing pattern' should 'be understood as concretised via linkages to a very specific set of educational institutions' (p.80). They then pointed to how parents interacted with two different types of schools to secure advantages for their children: a selective independent school and a state school that served an affluent population, and how these interactions took different forms as a result of the type of school in question. Specifically, they noted that the parents of

students at the independent school 'micromanaged' the university applications process for their children, whereas parents of students at the state school worked to secure entry for their children into a special 'gifted and talented' program at the school, and then let the school guide the university preparation process.

However, Weis et al.'s (2014) account suffers from over-generalisation about parents' approaches, and a lack of attention to variation and nuance. This is likely grounded in the study's multi-sited approach in which the differences among the schools served as the primary analytic frame, with less attention paid to variation in parent experiences within the schools. Where variation in parents' experiences is noted, the parents in question are low-income and from minority ethnic groups, whereas affluent White parents are depicted as a monolith.

Writing in a Chinese context, Chiang (2018) offered a contrasting account of parents' engagement with their children's university admissions processes at an elite public high school in Beijing. Unlike the parents who 'micromanaged' the private school in Weis et al's (2014) study, these parents mostly ceded control of the process to the school. There are clear similarities between the Chinese and UK educational systems, where university admissions are largely determined by performance in subject-specific examinations, in contrast to American university admissions which heavily weigh extra-curricular activities, leadership skills, and other factors wherein familial intervention in preparation can be advantageous (Weis et al., 2014). An exam-based admissions context would seem to naturally put more emphasis on school-based preparation.

However, although most of the parents in Chiang's study did not 'micromanage' the process and entrusted it largely to the school, most did intervene when their children experienced academic setbacks, such as poor performance in testing that was seen to put their chances of elite university admission at risk. This included contacting teachers to strategise about improving students' performance, and coaching students in their performance themselves. However, Chiang emphasised the 'contingent' nature of parental involvement in this context, based on students' performance and perceived risk regarding their chances of elite university admissions.

Significantly, Chiang explored inequality and variation even amongst affluent parents, who all possessed high levels of 'cultural capital' in the form of knowledge of the educational system, yet in rare cases some parents failed to activate this capital even when their children were struggling within the system. However, Chiang did not

explore the reasons why parents failed to do this, and this thesis works within this gap to examine barriers to parental intervention in the university admissions process (see Chapter 6).

Parents' actions negotiating university admissions

Like Lareau's (2011) work, the three studies showed that parents intervened in the school, whether that was intensively and frequently (Weis et al., 2014) or only when students experienced academic setbacks (Chiang, 2018). Van Zanten (2015) offered fruitful insight into parents' desires to foster their children's sense of 'independence' (p. 37), although there is a lack of detail regarding tensions that parents might experience regarding when to intervene and when to keep their distance in order to foster independence, and the dilemmas therein.

Weis et al. (2014), Van Zanten (2015), and Chiang (2018) all outlined how parents were able to draw on their own biographies and social networks to provide practical direction-finding information that advantaged their children in the university admissions process. In some cases, parents who were highly educated and therefore academically accomplished themselves coached their children on specific content areas and test-taking strategies (Chiang, 2018). Others secured volunteer experiences for their children through family friends that were thought to enhance the students' admissions profiles (Weis et al., 2014). Some parents helped students with admissions essays, crafting topic ideas (Van Zanten, 2015, p. 35), or editing them (Weis et al., 2014, p. 101). Many parents accompanied their children to university visits as prospective applicants (Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014). In the course of the university admissions process, some parents used the term "we" (Van Zanten, 2015, p. 37; Weis et al., 2014, p. 101) and even just "I" (Weis et al., 2014, p. 101) to describe the work undertaken.

'Concerted cultivation' and the school, student, parent nexus

The concept of 'concerted cultivation' can be fruitfully applied to analyse not only how parents negotiate university admissions (as has been argued in the extant literature), but how the elite school and its students also negotiate the process. Although their focus was not on university admissions, but on students' abstract

futures and present identities, Maxwell and Aggleton (2013b) sought to examine to what extent students, parents, and four elite schools in England enacted 'concerted cultivation'. They interpreted the concept through a narrow frame, with limited data, and concluded that it was not salient in that context. The findings in this thesis challenge this conclusion.

Like other authors, (for example, Vincent, 2017; Yemini et al., 2019), Maxwell and Aggleton (2013b) emphasised one facet of the broad kinds of practices Lareau identified as flowing from a 'concerted cultivation' approach to parenting: that is, time devoted to structured extra-curricular activities and other forms of enrichment and skill development. There is a notable lack of attention to academic and intellectual forms of 'concerted cultivation' in the context of the elite school. Interpreted through this narrow frame, the authors argued that the elite school enacts 'concerted cultivation' work to some extent, in encouraging a 'rounded' curriculum that included the development of extra-curricular skills. However, it is also important to note that data collected about the school's practices was in the form of the school's outward-facing promotional material, rather than data derived from participant-observation within the school or interviews with school staff, in which this thesis is grounded.

With a similar focus on extra-curricular accomplishment, Maxwell and Aggleton (2013b) asserted that 'concerted cultivation', with its attendant emphasis on effortful action, was not salient among students. They argued that many students displayed 'effortless achievement' (p. 90), although it should be highlighted that perhaps the authors, like some researchers of privileged groups appear to be (Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009), were mesmerised by the students' performances of 'confidence and poise' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013b, p. 88), and perhaps more uncertain and unsettled selves lay beneath these surface displays.

Where parents, on the other hand, were depicted as enacting 'concerted cultivation' to some extent, it was from the vantage point of the process of choosing a school, with no empirical attention to how the parents engaged with their children's educational trajectories once they were enrolled in the school.

In contrast to Maxwell and Aggleton's (2013b) findings, I will argue here that 'concerted cultivation' is an important analytical starting point from which to analyse the actions of the elite school, its students, and their parents, particularly in the context of university admissions. Although the concept comes from the parenting

literature, I take the concept further to show how not only do parents enact 'concerted cultivation' work, but so does the elite school, their students, and the tutors that families hire.

Overall, there has been a lack of attention paid to how multiple actors enact 'concerted cultivation' in relationship with one another in the university admissions process. Sun and Smith (2017) and Ying and Wright (2021) offer different perspectives on 'concerted cultivation' work, with the former focusing on parents and private consultants, and the latter focusing on the school and private consultants. This work is fruitful, although the role of students themselves as participants in co-creating 'cultivation' work is not focused upon in these accounts, and there is a need for research that attends to the complexities of the collective work of many actors—the school, students, parents, and private tutors all in relationship with one another.

Ying and Wright (2021) suggested that the international schools and elite public schools they studied in China enacted 'concerted cultivation' vis a vis preparing students for university admissions abroad, but their engagement with this idea was limited, reading more like a list of the school's university advising and extra-curricular programming, and lacking sufficient ethnographic detail as to how this work was enacted on-the-ground. Importantly, the Chinese parents in Ying and Wright's (2021) study differed from most Trinity parents as they did not have first-hand experience of the admissions process for the universities their children were targeting in the UK and US. This made them particularly reliant and dependent on the school and private counsellors for expertise, 'outsourcing' 'concerted cultivation' work to those actors. Because of these parents' own lack of relevant knowledge in this area, they experienced a strong degree of distrust of the school's provision and even the efficacy of the private counsellors' work, as they were not able to provide a check on the process.

Sun and Smith's (2017) put forward the concept of 'collaborative cultivation' between parents and private consultants, however their study was not carried out in the context of elite schooling and therefore lacks attention to the pivotal work of the elite school. Further, there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships and interactions between actors, and the areas of disagreement and tension that are a part of this collective work, as well as synergistic collaboration.

‘Cultivation in concert’

In sum, this thesis makes a major contribution to the study of elite schooling by putting it into sustained dialogue with the literature around the ‘concerted cultivation’ (Lareau, 2011) enacted by middle-class parents. It also reframes Lareau’s ideas around ‘concerted cultivation’ in important new ways, using ‘concerted’ to signal mutually reinforcing work carried out by multiple actors in relationships with one another. Finally, it highlights the importance of attending to the tensions that are part of working collectively and ‘in concert’.

In Chapters 5 - 7 I will show how the work of ensuring elite university entrance is the result of the mutually reinforcing actions of multiple actors, not only encompassing parents and the school, but also students themselves, and private tutors—I term this ‘cultivation in concert’, deploying an orchestral musical metaphor. This marks an important contribution to the field of elite schooling, which has tended to neglect the role of parents and private tutors in shaping young people and their trajectories. It also makes a fruitful contribution to studies of ‘concerted cultivation’, which have not paid serious attention to the roles of multiple actors working together, and the complexities of this work.

Drawing on this metaphor I illuminate the complexity of ‘cultivation in concert’, showing how this collaborative work between different actors was also charged with inherent disagreements and contradictions among them. In this way, I make visible the complex relationships and realities of how privilege is enacted on-the-ground, in order to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how educational advantage is (re)produced.

Parents’ rationales that underpin ‘concerted cultivation’ work

Lareau (2011) does not explicitly analyse her participants’ motivations and rationales for employing certain parenting practices such as ‘concerted cultivation’. However, others who have deployed the concept of ‘concerted cultivation’ have used the term to analyse instrumentality in parents’ actions (Maxwell & Yemini, 2019; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). Maxwell and Yemini (2019) analysed how parents sought to ‘maximise the opportunities for their children to succeed through investing various resources in forms of cultivation practices that are concerted and concerned’, emphasising the goal-oriented mobilisation of parental resources with the express

purpose of conferring advantage. They wrote that these parents are acting in order to 'secure status' and to 'facilitate their children's future trajectories' (p. 621).

While Lareau's (2011) work did not ask the question of *why* parents adopted 'concerted cultivation' childrearing approaches, examining parents' rationales and strategies behind their actions, as parents themselves make sense of them, is important to this thesis. To inform an understanding of this, we can look to both the composition of this particular class fraction, what I term the 'pseudo-meritocratic elite' (as outlined in the discussion of affluent London parenting in Chapter 2), and draw upon work on positioning for higher education within a neoliberal frame (also discussed in Chapter 2), to help understand the thinking and sense-making that might underpin 'concerted cultivation' and produce a sense of precariousness and anxiety on the part of the upper-middle-class.

In this vein, Weis et al. (2014) suggested that the site of higher education admissions is seen not only as a site of competition for future employability, but also as a site of 'class warfare' to define class boundaries. Weis et al. argued that the parents in their study viewed attendance at highly selective postsecondary institutions as a ticket to the 'new upper middle class', and so university entrance was imbued with implications for both subsequent economic and social class status. The parents interacted with the process with great anxiety, which was grounded in trying to minimise risk in what they perceived to be a very high-stakes process.

However, Irwin and Elley's (2011) UK study represented a fruitful analysis of diversity within and across classes regarding perceived precariousness and anxiety. They argued that 'anxiety about facilitating a good future for their children is a *particular*, rather than a *general* account of middle-class parenting experiences' (p.492). Furthermore, these authors noted that, amongst middle-class parents, 'where circumstances and background meant they were less likely to assume their children's educational success', they found 'a more strategic orientation to their children's education' (ibid.). They pointed to examples of this in one family where both parents occupied senior professional roles, having come from White British working-class backgrounds, and in one professional middle-class Black British family keenly aware of how race impacted their children's movement through middle-class life. Although they paid attention to parents' own biographies and childhoods and how those shaped their actions as parents, there was room for more detailed individual accounts, which my thesis seeks to present.

Further, important work has been conducted that sought to position 'parenting' within an ethical frame. This work challenged the dominant view of the parent – child relationship as 'goal-oriented' (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2011), with more emphasis on parents' 'duties' than on the intimate bond of love and care (Edwards & Gillies, 2011). This work speaks to an important gap in the literature, as there is a need for accounts of 'parenting' that are attuned to parents' affective concerns about their children's wellbeing, and of the possible negative effects of pressure to achieve.

In sum, this thesis adopts a three-part focus on the elite school, its students, and their parents as they negotiate university admissions, situated in the context of elite schooling in London and UK university admissions. Within this, I attend to the complexities of the collective work of multiple actors. In the following chapter, I outline the methods employed in this study.

Chapter 4: Methods

Overview

My research was centred on one elite girls' school, Trinity School. This single-site approach allowed for closeness to the specific context of the school, its parents, and students, in order to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how these actors collectively negotiate university admissions. My aim was an intense 'examination of the particular', although findings from this context are likely to resonate in similar elite school contexts (Pring, 2004, p. 41), and so a qualitative research design was adopted. The study was guided by the following research question: How do an elite London independent girls' school, its students, and their parents negotiate university admissions?

The research methods employed included in-depth interviews with parents of students and with sixth form students, interviews with senior school staff and with external education service providers, participant-observation and observation of university application preparation activities, observation of higher education and careers events at the school aimed at parents, and documentary analysis of key school materials. These methods will be outlined in more detail later in this chapter.

My work was informed by a social constructivist epistemological paradigm. I am concerned with how the participants in my study interpret, negotiate, and construct meaning around the space of higher education. Pring (2004) writes that 'to understand other people, therefore, requires understanding the interpretations which they give of what they are doing' (Pring, 2004, p. 41). I deployed ethnographic methods in this study in order to explore these 'subjective meanings' (p. 11).

Researcher positionality

I foreground my experience in Chapter 1, and it is this particular experience that helped me to position myself as somewhat of an insider-outsider (Khan, 2011) with my research participants. I often mention to participants that I attended an international school in Surrey. I signalled that I have experienced an affluent private school setting so as not to be perceived as a militant critic of the private sector. However, my schooling experience is different enough, due to its international 'otherness' and its location outside of what some parents described as the 'London

bubble' that I am able to present myself as somewhat naïve about their experiences at a private London day school. I was also able to signal a kind of cultural naivety, due to my American accent. Parents would often state 'well in the UK there's kind of an old school tie', or 'in England the class system is very strong', as if they were educating me about their culture as a foreigner. I did not emphasise just how many years I had spent in the UK—thirteen years, and let them interpret what they willed from my American accent. Rather than seeing myself as engaged in a game of deception, I simply did not want parents to assume that I knew what they were talking about (even if I did) meaning I was able to solicit more specific responses when parents made vague statements about 'England's class system' or 'London parents', which were crucial to the research.

I also drew on an insider-outsider dichotomy as I sometimes related that I had previously lived in New York and worked for an educational consultancy that helped relocating globally mobile executives find schools for their children. This signalled that I had worked closely with (and probably empathised somewhat) with affluent professionals. It also conveyed that I had experience navigating a pressurised, competitive global city similar to London in some ways. However, the experience was different enough that I could use my lack of knowledge of the particularity of the London context to solicit more expansive explanations from participants.

I would describe my positionality in relation to private schooling as one of 'measured empathy'. I am not an apologist for private schools. As a social scientist I am attuned to structures of power and inequality, and seek to identify and critique them. However, I am not an ideological critic of the private sector. I have participated in it, which makes me less prone to essentialise the sector, and helps me to humanise those who participate in it—parents, students, and teachers. It is a source of frustration to me that many researchers of private schooling do not elucidate their own educational experiences and their positionality in relation to their research participants. Some researchers in this space adopt an antagonistic and negative stance in relation to elite schooling and those who participate in it. The danger of this stance is that it can lead one to caricaturise research participants' lives, and a lack of empathy can lead them to miss complexity and nuance. Other researchers seem somewhat enamoured of the trappings of privilege found at these schools. I would argue they focus disproportionately on the most superficial and obvious manifestations of privilege—the aesthetics of the school setting, the confidence and

polish that students perform. In this study I aim to delve beyond this artifice. I seek to understand my research participants, not as caricatures of strategy and selfishness, but as people in relationship with other people, trying to make sense of their lives and working to prepare for the future as best as they can.

The vast majority of school staff, students, and parents I met were White. The lack of diversity was striking, and has important implications for wider issues of social justice. In this case, my own Whiteness meant that I blended in with such homogeneity. Trinity is a girls' school, and aside from an all-female student body, the majority of teachers and most senior school staff are women as well. Students are used to having female role models presented to them, in daily life in the form of their teachers, and in more contrived settings such as school careers evenings where alumnae speak about their professional pathways after Trinity. Many of the students seemed to view me as another female mentor-type figure, often seeking my advice about matters at hand. In a scheduled meeting with the school's Head Girl team to discuss outreach to seek student participants for the research, we spent most of the meeting discussing the students' upcoming Oxbridge interviews. They confessed how nervous they were and looked to me for advice. I always explained that I am not involved with the admissions process (and it helped that Education was not offered as an undergraduate subject at Oxford). But they looked to me expectantly. Since the school regularly presents students with female role models, and connects them with other women with the expectation that they will be helped and guided by experienced older women, I sensed that I was being constructed as one of these guides. I neither wanted to give the students an impression that I could help them more than I actually could, nor did I want to leave them feeling overwhelmed without offering any general stress-management advice. I did offer such advice with the hopes that it would help them to perform at their best on the day.

Further, most parents I spoke with were mothers. I spoke to a small number of fathers, but there were a couple of gendered obstacles to my interaction with fathers. First, in many Trinity students' homes the father is the breadwinner who often works in a high-earning sector such as private equity. This kind of affluence creates the conditions where the mothers in these families would not necessarily need to work outside the home, and might have a more flexible schedule within which to meet with me. Many of the mothers that I interviewed either did part-time work, were self-employed in a consulting or portfolio-based capacity, or did not work outside the

home at all. Second, my position as a young woman makes my interaction with other women feel more natural and free from any suspicion. I often met with mothers in a casual setting, alone at their homes, or in cafes over a cup of coffee. Such an interaction with a father would not be as easy, and so when I met with fathers I suggested meeting at their office, or in the case of one father who was self-employed as a consultant, we met in a meeting room at the school.

My association with the University of Oxford as a DPhil student is an obvious point upon which to reflect. As I outline in the next section regarding Access, my association with Oxford helped me secure access to the school as a research site. The Head of School had completed her PGCE in the Department of Education at the university and was keen to help facilitate research based in her former department. The Deputy Head of Academic Affairs of the school, one of the senior staff with whom I liaised most closely regarding participant recruitment, held an Oxford DPhil herself and her own daughter was currently studying for a DPhil. These shared experiences helped to build rapport and trust.

However, some other senior school staff, particularly the Head of Sixth form regarded me with suspicion. Although I cannot ascertain all of the reasons as to why this was the case, I do have a few observations. First, senior school staff who were directly involved in granting me initial research access (i.e. the Head and Deputy Heads of Academic and Pastoral Affairs) were the most warm towards me. They had exercised their own agency in authorising my presence, and they also perceived that they had something to gain from my research. From their perspective, they wanted to better understand the school's parents, what they desire, and how they engage with their daughters' education. In some cases, staff members who were primarily classroom teachers and not primarily administrators did not see such a direct benefit to their work as a result of the research. I tried to signal to teachers that I was friendly and empathetic, but I was aware that the fact that I was present in the school space at the discretion of their institutional superiors represented a problematic power imbalance.

Whilst I suspect that the association with a prestigious institution made it more likely for parents to respond to my recruitment efforts, it presented a challenging dynamic in terms of student recruitment. Whilst I think that my association with Oxford made it more likely that Oxbridge applicants would want to meet with me, I

think that it also had the effect of deterring students who were not applying to Oxbridge, or even students who might be struggling academically.

Further, my role as a doctoral student and researcher marked me as somewhat unusual within the school context. My relatively young age helped to mitigate this to make me appear unassuming in person. I found my ability to recruit participants was much more successful when I was able to meet students, and parents, face-to-face. I will elaborate this point in the next section on Access and Recruitment.

It is important to acknowledge my interaction with the undergraduate educational experience at Oxford. I have not been involved in undergraduate teaching or admissions, however I have had some exposure to undergraduate life through my college, St Edmund Hall. My college advisor is an admissions tutor and she has shared her views on the admissions process with me over informal chats. My college instated a Big Sister – Little Sister programme to pair undergraduate students with graduate students who share their academic and/or career interests. I volunteered for the scheme and was paired with a third-year undergraduate student. We became friends and she has shared some reflections on her Oxford experience with me. Periodically, whenever it is Fresher's Week for the new academic year, I seemed to find myself comforting first year students in distress who cross my path. This ranges from helping a student who is lost, late for a tutorial, and overwhelmed, to finding medical assistance for a student who is having a panic attack. Experiences such as these mean that, unlike many of the Trinity students whom I came to know, I harbour few illusions about Oxford as a magical light at the end of a sixth form journey.

I have also served in the role of Georgetown University alumni admissions interviewer in London. Many US universities require applicants to have an interview with an alumnus in their broad geographic area. The interview focuses on students' academic and extra-curricular interests, and the contribution they would like to make to their university community. In this role I interviewed a small number of applicants from London day schools or those whose families were London-based who attended boarding schools elsewhere in the UK. The interviews allowed me to gain some broader insight into what led students to apply to US universities from the UK, although this was not directly related to this research. I was also able to observe how students articulated their interests, strengths, and desired university experiences.

I ensured that I was not assigned any students from Trinity who were applying to Georgetown. I communicated my connection with Trinity to the Georgetown

committee, and the Head of Higher Education at Trinity knew that I would not be assigned any of her students. I did assist the Head of Higher Education with a workshop for students to outline general expectations for a US university alumni interview. This workshop was not specific to Georgetown, and the focus was on highlighting differences between the US university genre of interview and the Oxbridge subject-specific interviews with which students might be more familiar.

The case site and access

The characteristics of Trinity School made it a fruitful site to examine how the school, its students, and its parents collectively negotiate university admissions (see Chapter 1). Notably, several girls each year go on to attend some of the most elite universities in the US. Over the past few years, leavers have enrolled at seven of the eight Ivy League universities, Stanford, MIT, Duke, Georgetown and other prestigious US universities. This meant that, as a graduate of Georgetown, I could offer the school some support with US university admissions work. This would be a form of reciprocity to contribute to the school in addition to the research. It also helped facilitate opportunities for participant-observation of higher education preparation activities with students applying to UK universities, as well as US institutions.

I contacted the Head of School via email to explain my research project and ask for a short meeting. Her reply was very enthusiastic about the research, and she also shared that she had completed her PGCE at the Department of Education at Oxford and remembered it fondly. This shared experienced helped to develop rapport when we met. The Senior Deputy Head (Pastoral) also joined us, who was relatively young, dynamic, and also very interested in the research.

Walford (2008) writes that researchers 'have much to learn from sales people'. To obtain access to a research site one must compellingly present the benefits of the proposed research to the organisation or individual to which it is being 'sold' (p. 21). When I met with the Head and the Senior Deputy Head, I adopted this strategy. I tried to connect my research to a perceived need that the school had—to better understand their parents, and to make the interaction between home and school as smooth as possible. This resonated with the Head, who was very keen to learn more about 'parental expectations' regarding their daughters' schooling. She admitted that "the

more you know about your 'clientele'" (she used the word hesitantly), the better the relationship would be. Here I was able to 'sell' the research to help the school administration to address its own needs and goals. In this meeting, I also offered to volunteer to assist the staff member who handles US university applications, and the Head was very enthusiastic about the idea, stating that they had seen a rise in the number of girls applying to the US and have struggled to keep up with the volume.

For many independent schools, the relationship between parents and the school can be a difficult one. I was concerned that even if the senior administration were interested in the research, they might not feel comfortable asking parents to participate. The timing was right for this research at Trinity School, however. The Head stated that the relationship between the school and parents was now better than ever. She attributed this to the school's newly founded development office, which had organised social and fundraising events for parents and alumni that resulted in tighter bonds of 'trust', connection, and goodwill, as well as a healthy multi-million pound fundraising haul to build a new sports facility. Importantly, and interestingly, she noted that if I had approached the school about a year prior regarding the study, 'we probably wouldn't have felt comfortable doing it'. Further, the Senior Deputy Head, who would be my main point of contact going forward at the school, stated that I could put a notice in the school newsletter about the research, but that I would need to make it clear that the research was being conducted independently from the school. They were concerned that parents could perceive the research to be sponsored by the school in an instrumental way.

The Senior Deputy Head was a key 'gatekeeper' that opened up further levels of access for me (Walford, 1994, p. 192). She included an announcement about the research in the school newsletter over consecutive weeks to recruit participants for the pilot study. She permitted me to book rooms at the school to meet with parents, and gave me free reign to contact any members of staff I wanted to interview. I looked at the school calendar and identified upcoming events aimed at parents and asked if I could attend—she agreed. These events will be discussed later in this chapter.

Once I had begun the research, I experienced access as a multi-layered and on-going process, which was much more difficult to navigate on the ground than in principle. At first, I was required to wear a red badge with the word 'visitor' and to be accompanied at all times in my movements around school. Once my Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certification had been completed, I then needed to complete

the school's own safeguarding training. Once the whole process was completed, I was issued with a green 'visitor' badge and was free to move about the school on my own.

I was able to build friendly connections with essential school support staff, such as the porter who guarded the school gate, the main school receptionists, and the Head and Deputy Heads' personal assistants (PAs). I appreciated a friendly welcome when I was on the school premises, which helped me feel more at ease. I often encountered barriers to my physical movement around the school—the school receptionists kindly gave me directions to help me find unfamiliar buildings, and they supplied me with a school timetable so that I knew what time the periods began and ended to facilitate scheduling interviews and booking classrooms. There was an entry code to gain access to many of the school buildings. The first several times I needed to gain access for a meeting, the school porter would accompany me to the building and enter the access code himself. After some time, he relaxed in the knowledge that I was a friendly face, and gave me the code to enter myself.

There were obstacles to gaining access to certain events and to certain information. I wanted to attend events that would help me understand the specific context of Trinity School, even if they were not explicitly linked to the university applications process, such as the school open day for prospective students for sixth form entry and for Year 7 entry. The school's Admissions Director treated me with nervous scepticism. Despite what I said to the contrary, she seemed concerned that I wanted to use the open days as opportunities to recruit research participants amongst Trinity's prospective applicant pool. The idea that I simply wanted to observe, without recruitment agenda, seemed suspect to her. I tried to explain my desire to understand context and to be in school spaces, but with staff members that were not all well versed in qualitative research methods (some were), this was often hard to convey. Both the Admissions Director and the Director of Development were also very reticent to give detailed information about parental occupations or school bursaries, information that I sought to better understand the school's overall population and how my participants featured within it.

Recruitment

The process of recruiting research participants happened alongside the iterative process of conducting the research itself. There were settings in which I was simultaneously carrying out a volunteer role at the school as a form of reciprocity,

observing the workshop or event in which I was participating, and also subsequently recruiting research volunteers from amongst the attendees. I see my research engagement with Trinity School as composed of four broad phases that I will detail here.

First phase – summer term of students' Lower Sixth year (Spring 2016):

My aim during this time was to learn more about the context of Trinity School generally through interviews with senior school staff. I also sought to learn about the school's higher education preparation process. I met with the key higher education staff, attended higher education preparation events for students and parents, and familiarised myself with the content of the school's Higher Education and Careers portal, as well as other literature given to students and families. I conducted volunteer work with students applying to US universities as a form of reciprocity to the school, which also facilitated opportunities for participant-observation of university preparation activities for UK university applicants as well.

I attempted to recruit parents to participate via a reoccurring notice in the school's weekly newsletter. The Deputy Head's PA helped me to do this. However, the response was limited via this method. I soon learned that many parents only read the newsletter sporadically, if at all, and that this was also a source of frustration for senior school staff, a point over which we were able to connect and commiserate somewhat.

I did conduct some interviews with parents during this time. I interviewed parents whose daughters were in the sixth form, as well as those who were in the lower years. I expected that the university preparation process might begin in earnest earlier than sixth form. However, I found that students in the earlier years were more focused on the immediate demands of preparing for GCSE examinations, public examinations taken in Year 11. Further, I learned that even students in the Lower Sixth were unsure at that stage what universities to which they would be applying, and in many cases students had not finalised what subject they would apply to study at university. During the last two months of the Lower Sixth year students made significant progress in these areas, as they attended university open days, many of which were in June, and the school required students to begin drafting their personal statements with an advisor, which necessitated a final decision regarding their choice

of subject. However, students had yet to receive their predicted grades (they would receive them in September of Upper Sixth), which would in turn inform their university choices.

Second phase - school holidays (Summer 2016):

There was a logistical tension in the fact that, just as students were beginning the application process in earnest with more developed ideas, they were embarking upon an extremely stressful period that combined the university applications process with internal coursework deadlines. I wanted to anticipate this time pressure and sought to meet with students over the summer holidays when their schedules might be more flexible. However, to do that I knew that I needed to be able to offer something that was immediately useful to students in the short-term, to justify their time spent with me for the research. I thought that I could offer advice and feedback on students' personal statements from a third-party perspective (other than their teachers). I was confident that my Oxford association, an institution to which many students were applying, might also help. However, the school's Head of Higher Education stated that kind of general feedback would not be welcome at that point, as students had already begun to work one-to-one with subject specialists on their statements. I was ultimately directed to wait until the autumn term to interview students.

Third phase - September to mid-October 2016:

During this time I continued to advertise the research in the school's newsletter for parents. I received a small number of responses, and I conducted more parent interviews. However, I still needed to reach students. I was also aware that parents would probably be more likely to meet with me at the recommendation of their daughter, if I had met with her first; it was easier to ignore an anonymous notice in a newsletter. However, access to students at this stage was extremely difficult, due to the demands on their time. Understandably, the school wanted to protect students' time as much as possible, and were sceptical that participation in my research could yield any short-term benefits to the students. Certainly, it would not help them meet their immediate deadlines, as there was already a phalanx of support in place for these students. I tried to identify any possible gaps in the school's university applications provision, where I could step in and offer assistance that would be of immediate value

to the students. I could not identify such gaps. Further, I was conscious that unless I was able to offer students assistance with immediate deadlines, I did not want to take some of their valuable time. However, after the Oxbridge deadline had passed on 15 October students needed to wait until December to interview (if they had secured an interview). This time proved to be the most fruitful, as students were still busy with coursework, but experienced a lull in the university applications cycle.

Fourth phase - mid-October 2016 through January 2017:

I was also looking to expand the outlets I used to try to reach participants, and to seek out opportunities where I could meet students and parents face-to-face. I found that this was much more successful than emails or newsletters, as I believe I came across as friendly and unassuming, and was probably not the image of the distanced Oxford researcher that they might have expected. I was able to meet Upper Sixth students at the school's open day for prospective sixth form entrants. There was a reception before the informational talk began, and prospective families milled around, chatting with current teachers and students. I used the reception as an opportunity to quickly introduce myself to the sixth form volunteers, explain the research, and note their contact information if they were amendable (they all were). I was careful not to monopolise the students, as their role at the event was to mix with prospective students. But I made quick connections that yielded subsequent interviews at a later date.

The Deputy Head also facilitated a meeting with the Head Girl team, composed of six students, to discuss participant outreach. I was wary not to overly represent the experiences of the kinds of students that become part of the Head Girl team, who I expected would be particularly academically successful and driven. However, the team offered their help in reaching out to friends in particular subject areas or who represented other demographics I wanted to include in my research group. This approach of 'snowball sampling' has been taken up effectively in other studies of elites (see for example, Sherman, 2019).

I secured opportunities to interview a small number of US university applicants through the alumni interview preparation workshops that I offered. In addition, two students could not attend either of the two workshops that I offered, and so I met with them individually. They were very grateful for my time, and offered me

theirs as research participants. I also received some replies to an email that the sixth form administrator had sent to all Upper Sixth students on my behalf about the research. Helpfully, the email was sent after the Oxbridge application deadline had passed.

It proved most difficult to meet with parents face-to-face. Firstly, there were few events that brought Upper Sixth parents together. The school's Parent Teacher Association (PTA) hosted periodic coffee mornings that were attended by 'the same few people each time', as the Upper Sixth PTA representative told me. Based on the interviews with parents that I had already conducted, I sensed that it would be most fruitful to speak with parents individually, without the level of performance and self-censorship that a group dynamic would impose. There was an Upper Sixth parents evening at school in the autumn, which represented a rare opportunity. I asked the Head of Sixth Form if I could make a short announcement at the event about my research, and she agreed. The event did yield a few parents who approached me afterwards to give me their contact details. One parent turned to me and said, 'Are you the one who emails us who we are all too scared to reply to?' However, she said she would be happy to meet with me.

During this time I began to conduct interviews with students, some of whom connected me with their parents to interview. I interviewed more parents, and in turn some of those parents connected me with their daughters. However, the latter was less likely. They were very protective of their daughters' time. One mother turned to me after the parents evening and said that she would agree to meet with me if I promised I would not need to interview her daughter subsequently; 'she's just too busy'.

Parent and student participants: interviews

In all cases I interviewed parents and their daughters separately. Of UK university applicants I interviewed: five pairs of Upper Sixth students and one of their parents (which was the mother in all but one pair where I interviewed the father, who was the primary parent involved with his daughter's schooling); five other Upper Sixth parents; and three other Upper Sixth students (one of these students was applying to both UK and US universities, and ultimately matriculated at a US university).

In addition I interviewed one Upper Sixth student-mother pair where the student was applying exclusively to US universities, and another student who was

applying only to US institutions. To better understand the years of schooling and type of parental engagement that preceded the sixth form years, I also interviewed eleven parents of girls younger than sixth form. In total, I interviewed ten students in the Upper Sixth, from a year group of about 110 students. I interviewed 22 parents of students at the school.

Although all of these interviews informed the themes that I present in the findings, in terms of necessary decisions about which participants' experiences to highlight in more in-depth ways, I drew most significantly upon the five Upper Sixth students applying to UK universities and their parents, who formed the student-parent pairs. I also drew significantly upon three other parents beyond these pairs to provide detailed examples of salient themes in the findings. I will refer to these participants as 'key participants' here. I explain my rationales for these decisions at the conclusion of this chapter, in the section titled Approach to analysis.

Below is a summary overview of information about these key participants. (Participant names have been changed to protect anonymity.)

Summary Information for Key Upper Sixth Form Participants

Table 1. Upper Sixth Parent-Student Pairs

Parent	Daughter	Applied to Oxbridge?	University Attended	University Subject	Nationality
Frances	Arabella	Ox	Manchester	French and Arabic	Turkish/American
Daphne	Amelia	Ox	Bath	Maths	English
Lisa	Cora	Cam	Cambridge	Medicine	English
Maria	Clara	Cam	University College London	Anthropology	Italian
Ian	Samantha	No	Leeds	Neuroscience	Canadian/Thai

Table 2. Upper Sixth Parent only

Parent	Applied to Oxbridge?	University Attended	University Subject	Nationality
Parvati (daughter Talia)	Cam	Durham	Natural Sciences	Canadian/Hong Kong
Alice (daughter Charlotte)	Ox	Nottingham	Medicine	English
Lily (daughter Sophie)	Cam	Imperial College London	Natural Sciences	English/Hong Kong

Across the remaining three Upper Sixth form student participants, and the remaining two Upper Sixth form parent participants, the following subjects studied were also represented: History, History of Art, and Computer Science. All of these students also matriculated at Russell Group universities. In the year group of approximately 110 students at Trinity School, among the students who attended UK universities, all went on to attend Russell Group universities with the exception of less than ten students who did not. In the year group, approximately 15 students went on to matriculate at Oxford or Cambridge universities.

Whilst I had anticipated a sub-focus in my research on US university applicants, most of the students I met with were applying only to UK universities. I found that many of the US applicants were studying for the IB, and had more internal coursework deadlines than their A Level counterparts, meaning that they felt they had even more of a time shortage. I did interact with US applicants outside of an interview context, however, in my participant-observation of US university preparation activities. I came to understand that the vast majority of the school's US applicants were working with external US university applications counsellors. In fact, only four students out of sixteen were *not* working with a counsellor outside of the school. Further, the Head of Higher Education had a policy where she would not get involved with the student's application process (e.g. reviewing admissions essays) if the student was working with an external counsellor. She said this was to avoid a problem of 'too many cooks'. I explored the role of US university applications counsellors in interviews with some of these counsellors themselves, as well with some students and

parents who contracted with them. However, the experiences of US applicants did not provide fertile ground for an exploration of the role of the school in negotiating university admissions and its intersection with the work of students and their parents. The school's infrastructures of support were oriented towards UK applicants. As a result, I focused on this area.

I expected to consider the perspectives of students who were not applying to universities, however I struggled to find any, which is telling in itself. Each year, the Head of Higher Education said, there might be one or two students who go to art college. The school has a particularly strong visual art programme. However, that seemed to be the extent of alternative pathways that did not include a university degree. In that year's cohort, one student went on to attend art college.

Most of the students that I interviewed were academic high achievers. I do think that my association with Oxford, a prestigious university known for being very academic, was a hindrance in this regard. I think that it might have deterred some students from wanting to meet with me. They could have assumed that I was only interested in Oxbridge candidates. However, the school is a very academic school overall, and half of the year applies to Oxbridge. Further, the school places an overt emphasis on Oxbridge preparation, and thus I wanted to explore the experiences of students who interacted closely with this provision. I did meet with students who were not applying to Oxbridge, but in most cases it was because they were also applying to US universities (the school discourages students from making both US and Oxbridge applications stating that the workload involved to manage both is often untenable).

I was able to interview students who were applying to a range of subjects across the arts, social sciences, and sciences. Students represented a range of nationalities. Most students at the school are English or European. Most of these students had at least one parent who worked in the financial sector, often banking or private equity. Others worked as lawyers, real estate developers, or for the BBC. One parent was the head of another independent school. In many cases, the father in these families was the breadwinner and the mothers who met with me were not employed full-time outside the home. I am conscious that this would have facilitated their ability to meet with me more readily. However, this family dynamic is prevalent in the school as a whole, I learned in my conversations with the Director of Development. Regarding the class backgrounds of participants, all were upper-middle class in terms

of wealth, but some had working-class or more modest middle-class origins, and in my findings I identify how this shaped their approaches as parents.

Representation and race

The students and parents who participated in this research broadly reflected the overall population of the school, where the overwhelming majority was White, with some Asian students represented. One of the students I interviewed claimed both White and Asian ethnicity (with one White parent and one Asian parent), and the rest of the students were White. Two of the Upper Sixth form parents I interviewed were of Asian ethnicity, and the rest were White.

It is important to emphasise that the affluent White participants in the study reflected the overwhelming composition of Trinity School itself. Indeed, the lack of racial and socio-economic diversity in elite independent secondary schools themselves further perpetuates inequality, as the resources and high levels of investment the school provides were offered mostly to affluent White students, who already benefited from intersecting forms of racial and socio-economic privilege. While other studies have fruitfully examined the perspectives of students who are traditionally underrepresented within elite schools, including students from minority ethnic groups and/or low-income students (Khan, 2011; Weis et al., 2014), this study focused on the experience of students from a dominant majority in the elite school context.

Since this research concluded, the school has begun a more concerted programme of outreach to recruit a more socio-economically and racially diverse student body, however there is still significant work to be done. At the time that this research was conducted, senior school staff pointed to the school's nascent Development division (composed of one staff member at that time) as instrumental to increasing diversity in the school through securing more funds for bursaries and scholarships.

Accessing students and parents and contours for future research

Both the school and parents worked to guard access to students' time, which was viewed as scarce and valuable as they negotiated academic and extra-curricular commitments as well as university applications. As a result, the number of students I interviewed was limited. These are challenges inherent in securing access to elite groups. Notably, studies where the researcher is also a teacher at the elite school have facilitated fruitful work that is able to draw on extensive participant-observation with students made possible by the researcher's employment there (Howard et al., 2014; Khan, 2011; Taylor, 2021). Although producing valuable insights, these interactions are shaped by the particular power dynamics inherent in the teacher-student relationship, and my external position outside of school hierarchies facilitated a mode of interaction with students unencumbered by the background of performance and assessment inherent in academic contexts. Further, this position facilitated more ease of access to parents' perspectives than would have been possible in the role of teacher. Working within these limits on access to students, however, I worked to ensure I interviewed students whose intended university subjects encompassed the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as well as students who were experiencing academic success, and others who were struggling to some degree in school.

As noted, the significant majority of the mothers at the school were not employed full-time outside the home, and the composition of my study reflected this reality, where few of the mothers who participated were employed full-time. Although I sought to secure the participation of more mothers who had significant present involvement in the labour market, there were significant challenges to this. Some mothers who were employed full-time declined to participate citing time constraints and work deadlines. Future research would benefit greatly from their perspectives, but the constraints on their time must be recognised. I met some mothers (and fathers) at their offices for shorter meetings in conference rooms. However, mothers who were not employed full-time devoted as many as a few hours to meetings with me in their homes or over a meal. It is important to note, however, that most of the mothers who participated in the study had been involved in the labour market in professional managerial careers for some time (in many cases, before having children), even if they were no longer employed at present. In this way, these mothers were able to draw on past experiences, despite a lack of present engagement.

Similarly, it was more difficult to access fathers than mothers, as most fathers were employed in high-earning, time-intensive occupations such as private equity and corporate law. Future research would benefit from more attention to father's voices and perspectives, including how they may differ from their partners', and how childrearing is negotiated within couples. However, it was clear from conversations with mothers and their daughters that in most cases mothers were the ones who undertook close engagement with the university applications process, a finding supported by the extant literature on affluent parenting (Ball, 2003; Hamilton, 2016; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2007; Van Zanten, 2015; Vincent, 2017; Weis et al., 2014).

In addition, the parents who agreed to participate were more likely to be outgoing and involved in school life. Some were less so, but perhaps had a particular grievance they wanted to air about the way something at the school was handled. Others were interested in education, and wanted to hear more about my research. Some were working on side projects that were education-related. This is an inevitable result of seeking volunteer participants, as participants will be more likely to be involved if the subject is of personal interest to them. However, by working to reach parents in a variety of ways including the school newsletter, in-person events, word of mouth referrals from other parents, and upon the recommendation of their own daughters, I worked to widen the range of participants I was able to recruit.

Research design and methods

My research design encompassed a range of different ethnographic methods including: documentary analysis of key school materials, participant-observation and observation of university application preparation activities, observation of higher education and careers events at the school aimed at parents, interviews with senior school staff and with external education service providers, and in-depth interviews with parents of students and with sixth form students. Although securing access to school events and spaces was difficult, as outlined previously in this chapter, participant-observation in these spaces was an important part of my research strategy. Participant-observation offers an important lens through which to better understand how dynamics are worked out in students' everyday lives in schools (Anderson-Levitt, 2013; Delamont, 2014; Mills & Morton, 2013). In this research, this took the

form of assisting with university preparation activities and conducting workshops with students, as well as time spent 'hanging out' in the sixth form common room.

Documentary analysis of key school materials

Gaztambide-Fernandez and Howard (2010) acknowledged that the internet has made it easier to obtain information about elite schools (p. 206). A great deal of information about a school's academic, extra-curricular, and university preparation offerings are available online. Further, one can see how the school positions and markets itself to potential parents and students. I knew that these could provide fruitful points of departure in the interviews I conducted with parents, staff, and students. For this reason, I conducted document analysis of the schools' website and prospectus.

Both prospectuses and websites have frequently been units of analysis in studies of elite education (Brooks & Waters, 2014; McDonald, Pini, & Mayes, 2012; Wardman, Hutchesson, Gottschall, Drew, & Saltmarsh, 2010). Prospectuses are static documents compared to the dynamic, changing interface of websites. However, prospectuses are significant documents to analyse for precisely this reason. The school's administration views them as more permanent representations of the institutional self. They 'require the input of multiple stakeholders, demand significant expenditure from school budgets, [and] are widely distributed' (Brooks & Waters, 2014; McDonald, Pini, & Mayes, 2012; Wardman, Hutchesson, Gottschall, Drew, & Saltmarsh, 2010). Further, prospectuses are documents that are deeply concerned with futurity, that is, how the school forms, prepares, and positions students in relation to the idea of the future. The prospectus offers a window into what the school values and enacts in relation to preparation for the future. This helps to better understand what educational trajectories are represented by the school, and how parents and students are in dialogue with these. The prospectus also provides insight into what hopes for the future might draw parents to apply to and enrol their children in the school. The document presents important messages to explore in the context of interviews.

Pring cautions against a view of documents as merely 'resource' (p. 833), as 'sources of evidence and as receptacles of inert content' (p. 821). Like Pring, I take a view that documents are 'active agents' (ibid.), which 'do things as well as contain things' (p. 822). The prospectus and the school's website actively make meanings and

construct narratives, with which parents and students are in dialogue. Through interviews I explore some of the ways in which parents and students might ascribe to, reject, or negotiate messages in these documents.

Participant-observation and observation of university application preparation activities

In addition to attending students' University Preparation Programme meetings, I attended two key day-long events at the school that took place in June: University Preparation Day for the Lower Sixth Form, and Welcome to the Sixth Form Day for Year 11 students who would be continuing on in the school's sixth form, joined that day by new entrants to the school who would be starting in the autumn. The focus of the University Preparation Day for the Lower Sixth was the drafting of students' personal statements.

I had also emphasised to the Head of Higher Education that I wanted to offer reciprocity to the students and the higher education staff team in any way that would be helpful. At her request, I gave a presentation to the girls on the topic of 'What it's like to be an undergraduate at a US college', a subject that she thought would be useful. She thought that it would be helpful for the girls to hear more about the nature of the US undergraduate experience to have a clear vision of what was in store, and to inform the writing of their applications essays to help them to emphasise how they could contribute to university life. The talk was part of the students' weekly timetabled University Preparation Programme.

I also delivered a talk to girls who were applying to US universities on 'Making the most of your college tour', also at the Head of Higher Education's suggestion. She said that many girls came away from their university visits awed by impressive facilities, but often did not get past those impressions to think critically about whether the university would be a good fit for them, or to take the opportunity to ask probing questions about student life and campus cultures. In the talk, I outlined some thinking points that the girls could consider, and questions they might want to ask current students, as well as questions to ask themselves.

Also during June of the Lower Sixth year, US applicants who were not working with an external applications counsellor were given two meetings with a volunteer Trinity parent who also works as an external applications counsellor. In

these sessions, students received support in thinking about ways to address the respective universities' applications essays. This included talking about their academic interests and their extra-curricular activities. I was able to observe these one-to-one sessions with two different students. The students were comfortable with my presence; in this case I was quietly taking notes off to the side. The students and the volunteer met in the higher education resource room, a large room where students and staff often come and go. Further, the students recognised me as a familiar face as I had already made the presentation on US university undergraduate life. As outlined earlier in this chapter, I also conducted US university alumni interview workshops and I observed how students engaged with these sessions.

Observation of higher education and careers events aimed at parents

I attended relevant higher education and careers events aimed at parents, which provided context to inform my interviews with them. It was fruitful to hear the questions that parents asked, and what ideas and concerns arose. I observed the school's Higher Education Forum for Lower Sixth students and their parents. Its purpose was to help applicants to universities in the UK gain more insight into different subject choices. There were presentations held in different classrooms on various subjects (e.g. Anthropology, Engineering etc.), and an opportunity for questions and answers at the end of each talk. There was also a separate presentation on applying to Oxbridge. I also attended the school's meeting for prospective US applicants, for Year 11 students and their parents. In the autumn, the school hosted visiting admissions representatives from US universities, who delivered an evening information session for students and parents, and I observed this presentation.

I also attended events that were not explicitly related to university applications, but that helped me gain more context about the school and the sixth form. This included Trinity admissions open days for prospective students and their families in the sixth form and Year 7. In addition, I attended two pastoral events aimed at parents as part of the school's Challenge Week. The week of events was designed by the Senior Deputy Head to help girls, teachers, and parents to challenge fear of failure, celebrate resilience, and promote awareness of mental health and wellbeing. My observation of these Challenge Week events gave me a common point of reference with the girls and parents who also attended these events.

Interviews

I employed semi-structured interviews with participants. The use of interviews as a method is ubiquitous in research in elite educational settings (2004). Interviews consist of 'maintaining and generating conversations with people on a specific topic or range of topics'. The method has the potential to allow the researcher to engage with participants' 'biographies, experiences, opinions, values, aspirations, attitudes and feelings', in their own words (May, 2001, p. 131). In the interview encounter I see myself as a 'traveller' accompanying the interview participant and co-constructing knowledge together, rather than a 'miner' looking to extract knowledge assumed to be pre-existing (May, 2001, p. 131). Some of the students and parents whom I interviewed observed that our conversations had prompted them to process, reflect on, and articulate certain ideas and experiences for themselves.

Interviews with senior school staff

I interviewed the Head of Higher Education and the Oxbridge coordinator to learn about how the school helps students negotiate the university applications process at each stage, and how they interact with parents during the process. I also had regular meetings with the Head of Higher Education at different junctures of the application process. I interviewed other members of senior school staff (below) to provide a window into how the school engages with parents broadly speaking. I interviewed the following seven senior members of staff: Head of Higher Education; Oxbridge Coordinator; Senior Deputy Head (Pastoral); Deputy Head (Academic); Admissions Director; Head of Marketing; and Development Director.

Interviews with external education service providers

I interviewed the founder of a tutoring company that parents indicated to me that they or friends have used for their children. I also interviewed a private external US university applications consultant who worked with many of the students. In these interviews I explored why parents and students engage their services, and how they help students negotiate the different phases of the university applications process.

In-depth interviews with parents

I conducted in-depth interviews with eleven parents of sixth form students (including one parent of a US university applicant), and with eleven parents of younger students. Interviews with parents of younger students helped me to understand parents' perspectives on students' educational journeys throughout the school at different phases as they were happening. Interviews with parents of sixth formers encompassed a variety of topics. We discussed parents' hopes for their daughters, including parents' views of university destinations and subject choices that their daughters were considering or not considering. I asked them about how they navigated specific phases of the university applications process and how they interacted with the school and with their daughter at these junctures. We talked about how they interacted with their daughters' information-gathering and decision-making processes regarding higher education, and what they thought of the school's provision of higher education preparation and the messages that they might absorb from it. I also explored topics such as parents' own educational backgrounds and career trajectories, other children in the family and the educational and career paths they have taken, and reasons why they chose Trinity School for their daughter.

My longest interviews were discussions lasting a few hours; most interviews lasted around two hours. I conducted the interviews at a location of the parents' choice, either at a café, in their home, at their office, or in a classroom at the school. I suspect that the challenges of accessing parents in the context of an independent secondary school are partly to blame for the relative lack of research on this group. Unlike the school's students and staff, who are concentrated in one physical space during the school day, parents work and live all around London. Many of them lead busy lives, and typically at least one or both parents have a high-powered, time-intensive job. I sought to remedy this by volunteering to travel to a location that was convenient for them. This involved a great deal of travel on my part and logistical coordination.

In-depth interviews with students

I conducted in-depth interviews with ten Upper Sixth Form students. Interviews usually took place in a café near the school, or in a classroom or meeting room at school. These interviews tended to be shorter than my meetings with parents, and lasted about an hour to an hour and half. I invited students to send me a copy of their personal statement if they wished to in advance of our meeting. I expressed to them that I wanted to get to know their interests and more about them before we met. Almost all of the students sent me their statements. In most cases due to the timing of the interview students had completed them a few weeks prior and the memory of drafting them was recent. We began the interview talking through the student's personal statement. I asked students about interests, readings, and activities they had listed, and about the process of drafting the statements and the kinds of feedback they received and from whom.

We discussed students' university plans, and I asked them about how they navigated specific phases of the university applications process, and how they interacted with the school and with their parents at these junctures. We talked about how they gathered information and made decisions about the universities and courses to which they would apply. We discussed what they thought of the school's provision of higher education preparation and the messages that they might absorb from it. I explored topics such as what students thought of their parents' own educational backgrounds and career trajectories, and that of other children in the family, and the reasons why they (and/or their parents) chose to attend Trinity School.

Ethics

I followed the professional ethical guidelines of the British Education Research Association (BERA) in carrying out this research, and received approval from the University of Oxford's Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC). As I recruited interview participants, I made it clear that participation was voluntary and students, parents, and staff would in no way be negatively affected if they chose not to participate. All those who volunteered were provided with an information sheet and consent form, which they had the opportunity to review and sign. In all cases participants consented to the interview being recorded, with the

knowledge that students and parents would be given pseudonyms and some contextual information that could reveal their identity would be changed. To ensure the anonymity of the school, I used Trinity School as a pseudonym. I have not identified the school's location within London.

When I observed or participated in university preparation activities, I was introduced as a researcher and volunteer. Students understood that some anonymised observations of the university applications process might be included in the research. I spoke with the sixth form students whom I interacted with in the course of my alumni interview preparation sessions about my role as both a volunteer and a researcher, and they met with me on a completely voluntary basis.

In situations where I interviewed both a parent and her daughter, I made it clear that what we spoke about in the interview would not be shared with either their parent or daughter (as the case might be). I emphasised that when the findings were collated I would change some contextual information about participants to protect their anonymity.

Challenges of interviewing: power and performance

To begin to understand participants' subjectivities requires the development of rapport with participants, the 'mutual trust between the parties that enables the interview to flow more freely' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). This presented a challenge particularly in interviews with parents and with some students, if we were meeting for the very first time. I was affable and friendly and worked to put them at ease. The fact that I was relatively young helped, as students perceived me to be as broadly from their same generation, and parents might be reminded of their own daughter. This helped to mitigate a sense of an Oxford researcher as intimidating or aloof.

The interview encounter, like any social encounter, involves elements of performance. I have mentioned earlier in this chapter how I performed my identity in a certain way, emphasising certain aspects of my 'foreignness' and obscuring some of my familiarity with the UK. I worked to mitigate some of the inevitable performance of interview participants in certain ways. As I experienced interviews in different kinds of settings, I realised that parents were usually more relaxed and open when we met in their homes or in a café. These are places where one would normally entertain

friends, which would not be the case in their office or a meeting room at school. Students seemed most at ease when we met in a café near the school after the school day had ended. I had some meetings with students in classrooms or meeting rooms at school when they had a free period during the school day. I initially favoured this approach, as I felt that it intruded less upon students' normal routines, acknowledging that after school hours many of them were involved in activities, and also had a heavy coursework load to attend to. However, the advantages of a meeting in a café after school became apparent when I contrasted these interviews with those that took place at the school. At school, students seemed more distracted by the immediate demands of the day, and as we were in the school building, they were less likely to offer critiques of the school compared to meetings off site. At the café, a place associated with socialising, the tone of the interviews was often more similar to an 'off duty' conversation with a friend.

I was aware that some of the topics of conversation included areas that were relatively taboo to discuss, such as contracting with tutors or private consultants outside of the school. Other researchers studying elites in particular have articulated the challenges of facilitating conversations around taboo topics (Sherman, 2019). Some parents were very open about the fact that they engaged these services. It is not possible for me to know if all of the parents who disavowed contracting these services were all honest about the fact. However, it was useful to explore with parents 'what other people do'. This way, they could adopt the role of observing wider trends, rather than directly implicating themselves. At times I found it difficult to balance fostering a congenial rapport with the participant, whilst also challenging responses that that seemed to be vague answers, or perhaps half-truths. This involved a delicate balancing act.

Approach to analysis

The process of data analysis was on-going throughout the research. After I conducted interviews and attended school events, I recorded observations, thick description (May, 2001, p. 143), and thematic 'hunches and ideas' in field notes (Geertz, 1973). I have included some of this 'thick description' of my observations of and participation in the school context in my findings. I also recorded and transcribed the interviews, and I analysed my field notes alongside the interview transcripts.

I read each transcript from my interviews with senior school staff and with external education service providers. These interviews suggested some possible themes that I took note of as I read through the transcripts of interviews with students and parents. However, I took care to view interviews with students and parents as generative of themes in their own right, and I took note of themes that arose in these interviews.

Where I had interviewed pairs of parents and daughters, I read these interviews together, building a holistic picture of the university applications process for each pair, based on both accounts. I contrasted the accounts and looked for areas of agreement and collaboration, as well as areas of contradiction and conflict. At this stage, I read each interview transcript paying close attention to what I could learn about the particular experience of that individual and that parent-daughter pair, and I did not apply any thematic annotations at this stage.

In some cases, I was only able to secure access to interview the parent, or in fewer cases I could interview only the student. These interviews were nevertheless very fruitful and informed a wider understanding of the nexus between the school, students, and parents.

After reading all of the transcripts, I re-read the parent and student transcripts a second time, and this time I identified themes in their accounts. These themes were informed by the literature, and my understandings of the transcripts I had already read. I then drew from Allan's (2010) nuanced approach. After reading the data many times to identify themes and concepts, I adopted an approach that entailed both 'data simplification (managing and organising the data into more manageable chunks)' and 'data complication (a creative process involving thinking with the data and thinking about it in different ways)' (p. 43). I sought to pay attention to 'contradictions and differences' in the data as well as 'similarities and linkages' (ibid.). In this way, I was attuned to variation amongst my participants, as well as points of convergence, or disagreement between the school, students, parents, and tutors. This approach allowed close attention to what extent these actors worked 'in concert' in the university admissions process, and what that looked like.

It is important to note that the transcripts from interviews that I conducted in the early stage of the research with parents of girls younger than sixth form provided a fruitful contextual frame to better understand students' journeys over their years at the school, and the ways that parents conceptualised and engaged with their daughters'

education before the university process started in earnest in the sixth form. Although these parents are not the central focus of the research, one exception was the case of James, who also had an older child at a different school who was in the midst of navigating the university admissions process. When he spoke about his younger child at Trinity and anticipated her positioning for university admissions, he drew heavily on his experience with his older child to conceptualise this, and therefore I have included his account amongst the accounts of parents of older students.

Amongst the Upper Sixth students and parents, I wanted to write the findings in a way that would do justice to both the particularity of each individual and family, and speak to wider themes across the participants. In order to do this, I needed to make decisions about which participants I would profile and quote in more depth than others. I chose particular students and parents for one of two reasons. In some cases the student or parent articulated themes that were salient across many participants, but gave empirically richer details, or in some cases were more forthcoming in speaking about certain issues. In other cases, I chose to profile a student or parent precisely because their experience was resonant for a minority of other participants, but provided an important example of variation and difference across my participants.

I paid attention to possible connections between the extent to which parents adopted 'concerted cultivation' parenting approaches, and students' university admissions outcomes. I also searched for a possible connection between the extent to which students did 'concerted cultivation' work for themselves, and how they fared in university entrance. However, in both cases the sample of students and parents is too small to draw any conclusions about this, and it is important to note that students' university outcomes were broadly similar in that every participant went on to attend a Russell Group university.

In a similar way, I questioned the role that ethnicity and nationality might play in the process, however based on my sample (which reflected the demographic make-up of the school) it was not possible to make any claims about this. Like the school overall, my participants were mostly White (with the exception of two families which were Asian and one family where one parent was White and the other parent was Asian). Further, participants spanned a range of nationalities, which reflected the cosmopolitan composition of the school itself, and therefore it was not possible to infer any major differences across nationalities.

Conclusion

In sum, the single-sited focus of this research and the attention paid to multiple actors: school, students, and parents, and even private tutors, allowed for a fine-grained conceptualisation of how these actors worked in 'concert'. This intense focus on the particular of this site allowed for a better understanding of the complex relationships between the actors than studies of elite schooling and affluent parenting which have most often straddled multiple school sites (Lareau, 2011; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014; Weis et al., 2014).

Chapter 5: How the school facilitates students' navigation towards elite university destinations

Introduction

In this chapter I argue that Lareau's (2011) concept of 'concerted cultivation', which she uses to explain a dominant middle-class approach to childrearing wherein parents intensively develop their children's talents and skills, is not only practiced by parents, but by the elite school itself. Crucially, the school takes on this role of developing the students in its charge in a way that directly primes them for successful admission to the most selective and prestigious universities in the UK. Where for Lareau (2011), 'concerted cultivation' work is argued to abstractly advantage students in the educational system, I show explicitly how this happens in the context of university admissions.

Further, as outlined in Chapter 3, there is a lack of attention in the elite schooling literature (Forbes & Maxwell, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013; Khan, 2011) to the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools work to systematically secure advantage for their students in the context of elite university admissions. This literature has conceptualised how elite schools confer advantages primarily through lenses that connote passive processes, such as 'institutional habitus' and 'social and cultural capital stocks' (Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019). The lens of 'concerted cultivation', with its attendant emphasis on effortful action, effectively captures the nature of the work that the elite school enacts. Through a focus on the school's work of 'concerted cultivation', this chapter makes explicit how privilege is manifested at an everyday level in the concrete contours of the university admissions process.

I elucidate how the school as an institution enacts 'concerted cultivation' work, as it helps direct, prepare, and steer students towards elite university destinations. The range of knowledge, skills, experiences, and supports that facilitate students' trajectories are many. This work has organisational, social, and academic dimensions, and is brought into being by faculty and older students at the school, as well as by students' families. Moreover, students themselves articulate these location-finding and self-making processes.

Organisational dimension of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work

Lareau (2011) analysed parents' facilitation of an intensive, highly structured programme of extra-curricular activities for their children, and argued that this led to a sense of 'entitlement' in the students where they internalised a strong sense of their own value, as they came to expect these high levels of investment in the development of their selves. Trinity School enacted a similarly intensive, highly-structured programme of 'Oxbridge' preparation, which normalised the extra investment required to be a competitive 'Oxbridge' candidate, and which in turn made applications to Oxbridge a taken for granted part of ordinary life at the school; the school created conditions where the onus was on a student to opt out of an application to Oxbridge, rather than to opt in.

Each year, approximately half of the year group at Trinity School applies to Oxford or Cambridge universities (often referred to jointly as Oxbridge). The organisational context of the school's university preparation facilitates the completion of high-quality applications to Oxbridge well in advance of the earlier UCAS deadline in mid-October of the Upper Sixth year that these universities maintain. (Where the normal UCAS deadline for universities is in mid-January). The fact that the Oxbridge deadline is earlier than that for other universities would seem to favour students from schools that are well-organised and that help students prepare their applications well in advance of the normal UCAS January deadline. This is a difficult proposition, as the new academic year begins in September, giving students usually just over a month to finalise and submit Oxbridge applications following the summer break. Trinity School pre-empts this logistical challenge by starting the university applications process for all students in earnest in the summer term of the Lower Sixth year. In fact, in the academic year in which this research concluded (2016-17) the school decided not to have Lower Sixth students sit AS level exams. (Schools were given a choice to have students sit the exams or not, as this was a transition year before the government policy took effect which abolished the AS exams). According to senior school staff, this decision was taken to allow students to focus earlier on their upcoming university applications, without the distraction of optional exams. This was clearly a strategic decision taken by the school. Such organisational school-wide decisions seem to be taken with Oxbridge applications in mind, to the extent that the school's Head of Higher Education stipulated that all students have a final draft of their personal

statement ready to submit by 15 September. The deadline applied to all students, even those not applying to Oxbridge. This institutional policy put students in a position to be prepared and organised enough to apply to Oxbridge should they so wish.

The school required that all students produce a first draft of the personal statement in June of the Lower Sixth year. They are then instructed to spend time over the summer holidays refining the draft. All students worked on their personal statements with the one-to-one support of a teacher at the school whose subject specialism matched the student's desired university course of study. This teacher provided feedback on multiple iterations of the personal statement throughout the school summer holidays. Teachers laboured through their holiday, to enable all students (whether they intended to apply to Oxbridge or not) to arrive back to school in September with their personal statements finalised and ready to submit. These organisational practices made it possible, and highly likely, for a Trinity student to be able to submit a high-quality application to Oxbridge in advance of the October deadline. In fact, since the entire year group followed a timeline for preparation of their application materials that would enable an early application to Oxbridge, an Oxbridge application comes to be seen as expected and normalised, rather than extraordinary.

Further, the school mobilised resources to assist Oxbridge applicants in particular. At several junctures in the university applications process, Oxbridge applicants were identified as having particular extra demands placed upon them, and therefore as requiring extra support from school staff. At the Lower Sixth Higher Education Forum, an evening event held in March to which all Lower Sixth students and their parents were invited, there were subject-specific talks on applying to different courses (e.g. History, Engineering), and there was an additional information session regarding 'Oxbridge'. In November of the Upper Sixth year there was a parents' evening at the school where senior staff outlined the timings of university interviews and application decisions over the coming months, with a particular emphasis on the contours of the Oxbridge application process. The immediate demands on Oxbridge applicants were foregrounded, and staff spoke about the admissions process at length.

The school had two full-time staff dedicated to higher education preparation, but in addition one subject teacher also served as a designated Oxbridge coordinator. This teacher, Mr Williams, held an Oxbridge degree in the subject that he taught at

the school. His role was to support students in the various phases of their Oxbridge applications, and to keep abreast of changes in the admissions process and emerging trends. He also organised afterschool classes to prepare for the specific admissions tests required of Oxbridge applicants, which varied according to the course and university.

Further, the school helped students to prepare for the interviews that Oxford and Cambridge uniquely require. This made it more likely for students to be able to imagine being a successful Oxbridge applicant. The school partnered with another neighbouring private school to offer an interview preparation workshop on a Sunday. This facilitated an opportunity for students to do mock interviews with teachers from the other school, to practice the interview encounter with an assessor that they had never met before. Further, at one of the school's two full-day University Preparation Days for Lower Sixth Form students held in June, the school hired a public speaking expert to conduct a workshop with students to help them practice engaging confidently with strangers. They learned the body language that would help them to come across as poised and polished. Whether students had university interviews or not, they were told that the skills were important for 'meeting new people at university and making friends' and for 'networking' professionally. As a result of this programming, students were made to be familiar with an interview encounter and to be more confident in their abilities to thrive in such a setting.

Whilst the Oxbridge coordinator admitted that students who were not applying to Oxbridge could perceive that they were receiving less support for their university applications in comparison, he argued that the extra demands that Oxbridge placed on applicants in the form of admissions tests and interviews meant that the school needed to offer provision to match the needs of their Oxbridge applicants. Indeed, the segmenting off of Oxbridge applicants to receive extra support created a structure where to be an Oxbridge applicant meant to be special and set apart for extra investment. At the same time, since roughly half of the year group at Trinity School did apply to Oxbridge each year, it created a dynamic where applying to Oxbridge was not seen as extraordinary, but rather a process that many students went through. This special extra investment was normalised. In interviews with students, students who were not applying to Oxbridge felt that they needed to give a justification (and did give one) about why they had chosen not to apply. In this way, the organisation

dimension of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work created the conditions where the onus was on a student to opt out of an Oxbridge application, rather than to opt in.

Social dimension of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work

Students' senses of belonging and social connections with others in the school community (including current pupils and alumni) are well documented in the elite schooling literature (Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan 2011). Importantly, students drew upon these resources in ways that advantaged them, with concrete implications for university admissions. This advantage was conferred through fine-grained social processes at the elite school. Moreover, while parents are able to draw on their own biographies and social networks to provide practical direction-finding information that advantage their children in the university admissions process (Chiang, 2018; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014), elite schools also enact the same kind of work—representing an important social dimension to the concerted cultivation' work that the elite school carries out.

Beyond these formal supports, sixth form students at Trinity had significant exposure to Oxbridge graduates in the form of many of their subject teachers. Teachers are students' natural academic role models and guides, and of the senior school staff I interviewed, many had attended Oxford or Cambridge themselves. The school website listed the degrees held by staff next to her or his name, with dozens of teachers' names appended by (Oxon) or (Cantab). Close contact with Oxbridge-educated teachers made it possible for students to envision themselves as Oxbridge-educated one day, but even more importantly teachers were able to offer concrete, personalised advice about the suitability of particular courses at Oxford or Cambridge according to students' interests. For example, Daphne, the mother of Upper Sixth student Amelia, applying to study Maths at Oxford (Amelia had recently received the news that she had not been invited to interview) said:

The maths team are always very approachable, and I know that, since they knew that Amelia was applying for Maths, they've always been very supportive, you know, she's regularly talking to them about what she thinks she wants to do, and speaking to … because, I think Miss H, and Miss F, were both Oxford graduates in Maths, so she's been talking to them a lot about the subject areas, and trying to understand the

difference. So, I have to say I think the school have been brilliant, for Amelia, anyway, they have been very supportive.

Arabella, a student applying to study Arabic and French at Oxford enthused that the Oxbridge coordinator, who had graduated from the university within the last few years, had a network of Oxford-educated friends to draw upon:

He knew what he was talking about I think, also, because he was so young, he'd virtually just graduated; he knew what was going on. He has friends that he was still in contact with, you know, that he could have talked to. He used his friends for examples for loads of things, which was really helpful. Somebody would be talking about a course, and he'd be, like, I had a very good friend that did that course, he liked this about it, he didn't like this, he was at this college, you know, things that you can relate to, you know.

When students were in the Lower Sixth they also benefitted from the knowledge and experiences shared by older students in the Upper Sixth. The school had a 'vertical tutoring' approach, wherein sixth form students were assigned to small tutor groups composed of both Lower Sixth and Upper Sixth students. That way, younger students could benefit from the 'hindsight' of older pupils, as the school's website confidently declared. This brought Lower Sixth students into close proximity with students one year above them, and they saw the fine-grained details of navigating the Oxbridge applications process. Students who had successfully received offers from Oxford or Cambridge shared tips with Lower Sixth students both informally whilst chatting in the sixth form common room and formally through speaking at events such as the Higher Education Forum. At the Forum, two Upper Sixth students casually spoke in front of students and parents at the Oxbridge information session. They spoke in a relaxed, conversational way about their experiences of applying; one student was still dressed in her sport kit having come straight from training for the school team. She gave advice based on how she prepared for the Thinking Skills Assessment, a test required by Oxford for many social science subjects including Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) to which this student applied. The student spoke with confidence about how she chose a college to which to apply. She shared that although she favoured a certain centrally located older college,

she was dismayed to be pooled to a newer college further from the centre of town. The student emanated a sense of entitlement that gave the impression that she was choosing the college in the admissions process, not that the college was choosing her. Such a paradigm was facilitated through close interaction with Oxbridge-educated and Oxbridge-aspiring others, which provided students with the mundane everyday insight into these universities that made applications to Oxbridge seem normal, accessible, and far from extraordinary.

Students' parents also offered their own navigational expertise and insights. Many of the parents were Oxbridge-educated themselves, and so had an embodied familiarity with this privileged landscape. The parent body of Trinity School is largely composed of those who work in high-earning London-based sectors such as banking, private equity, and law, sectors which in turn have a preponderance of Oxbridge graduates (The Sutton Trust, 2016). If parents were not Oxbridge graduates themselves, it was highly likely that they worked and socialised with many Oxbridge graduates. Parents who had attended Oxbridge or whose spouse had attended did not admit to pressuring their children to follow in their footsteps. Most were very cautious to maintain that they wanted to let their daughter make her own choice. However, there were subtle social influences that shaped the students' own educational maps. Some students nonchalantly mentioned touring their parents' old stomping grounds at a particular Oxford or Cambridge college. Many had family members or family friends who had attended one of the two universities, which ensured that it was top of mind as they considered university options. Arabella explained:

In terms of which ones [universities] I'd choose, I always thought about Oxford. We had quite a few family friends, who were from there, or have introduced me to people who have been there. And, from, like, I don't know how old I was, I have just always thought about it as a possibility, so that's why I applied there. I didn't really give it much thought, I wasn't, like, this is where I'm ending up, I have to go here. It was just, like, it would be really nice if I could. That's why I applied there. But, the other ones, obviously, I went on open days, and I looked around Bristol, Exeter, and stuff, and I really liked them, so I applied there because of that. The school recommended a bunch of open days that are popular with the girls at my school.

Arabella had ‘always’ considered Oxford to be a ‘possibility’ that felt normalised, familiar, and within reach. In fact, it was only later and through more formal channels such as university open days that Arabella later acquainted herself with ‘the other ones’, that is, other Russell Group universities such as Bristol and Exeter.

Amelia voiced that she wanted to find her own path, but this was to be actualised by choosing to apply to Oxford rather than Cambridge, as Cambridge was where her father had studied:

[My dad] didn't want me to go to Cambridge or anything. It was more like where I want to go. I'm pretty sure my grandparents would have ... secretly would have liked me to go to Cambridge, but I don't think they'd say it ... because it's like a tradition in my dad's family, the men all go to St John's, Cambridge.

Even if she disregarded the lineage of attending St John’s, Cambridge, Amelia was able to feel a sense that Oxbridge was a place where she belonged. Because students, parents, and teachers so often elided the two universities together, any association with either Oxford or Cambridge permitted access to what was understood as ‘Oxbridge’.

This allowed students to construct Oxbridge identities at a very early stage. This was reinforced through how teachers, older students, and parents interacted with one another. Interestingly, staff voiced that many parents expected Oxbridge entrance as a product of having invested in a fee-paying education. At the same time, some parents articulated that they felt that the school over-emphasised Oxbridge entrance, and that staff and school promotional materials boasted about Oxbridge places secured in a particular year as a measure of the school’s success. Daphne, Amelia’s mother, stated:

…the schools pile on the pressure, at all of the sixth form evenings, it was, like, well, last year we got so and so many students to Oxford, and so and so many to Cambridge. And, it’s like, yes, what about all the other universities, you know. That sort of annoys me, but I know why they do it, I know they do it because they think that ambitious parents, such as us, are sending them to these schools in order to get them into Oxford and Cambridge. Which, possibly, is the case for some, it’s not the case for us. I wasn’t hell bent on [my daughter] going to either of those anyway, for me, the

important thing is that she goes to the university where she feels comfortable, because she's going to be away from home, she needs to make sure that she's going to be happy there, and particularly that she does the course that she really wants to do.

It seemed that in spaces such as the parents' evening, school staff were attempting to signal to parents what they thought parents valued and desired. Whilst some parents did place a premium on Oxbridge for their children, others express a rather balanced and open-minded view. However, based on the way that the school signalled to them, parents in turn perceived that the school valued Oxbridge places very highly.

These mutually reinforcing social dynamics, on the part of both the school and students' parents, created the context in which students learned to ascribe value to Oxbridge places. Whilst senior school staff were often quick to lay blame at the door of parents if students seemed overly preoccupied with Oxbridge entrance, some parents argued that the school had played a greater role in creating these expectations. Daphne, whose daughter Amelia had recently received the news that she had not been invited to interview for Maths at Oxford reported:

I have been thinking about that quite a lot, as to why there's that, you know, sort of, in Amelia's head that … And, I think, you know, the schools do talk about Oxbridge, and they single them out, it's like, if you're doing Oxbridge, well, you know. I think Trinity are possibly not as bad as some of the other schools. Some of the other schools I've heard of, where my friend's daughters are not on the Oxbridge track, they're being neglected because the Oxbridge ones are getting all the focus. Partly, it's a timing thing because obviously, you need to get your Oxbridge application in earlier, but I think it's also, they carry with them the reputation of the school, and if they manage to get into Oxford, the school can say, we've had fifteen people go to Oxford and Cambridge this year, well, excellent, you know, they feel that's what people like us demand.

Furthermore, Daphne called into question such an assumption:

And, actually, sometimes, I think they need to come back a notch a bit, because what we really want is, yes, we want girls who are academically strong, but we also want them to be stable, we want them to be well-rounded, we want them to be prepared for

life. And, we want them to be prepared for the knocks, which, in some ways, you know, the fact that Amelia hasn't got in, it is probably her first major knock. In terms of knocks, it is quite a controlled knock, and I don't think it's life changing.

In this way, conflicts emerged between the way that some parents sought to signal value and the way that the school did. (This issue is also taken up in Chapter 7).

Connection and intimacy with Oxbridge

Before discussing the academic dimension of the school's cultivation, it is important to note that the school and girls' families set the scene for connection to Oxbridge before the application process began. It was clear that in the context of their school and homes students received exposure to and support from Oxbridge graduates, and absorbed messages that valued these universities. Students often had close personal connections to Oxford and/or Cambridge through school or family. They had memories of spending time in Oxford and Cambridge that included school trips or family day trips, before they had set foot on a formal university open day. This sense of familiarity, and in some cases, intimacy with Oxbridge, came through in students' rationales for wanting to attend.

Eliza, applying to study History at Oxford said she had been to Oxford on 'a school trip in Year Eight, it was an art trip, or it might have been to Cambridge, I don't know, but we did … I've definitely been there. Then, I went round twice on the open days, one in September and one in June'. Perhaps it is telling that Eliza did not remember whether the school trip was to Oxford or to Cambridge and elided them together, but the point was that she was familiar with an Oxbridge setting.

Celia, also applying to study History at Oxford, did not even attend an official open day at Oxford, as she already felt sufficiently familiar with the place:

The official open days I've been to are the Edinburgh one and Leeds, and then I've looked around Oxford quite a few times, just with family friends that live there, or with my brother, when he was applying, stuff like that. So, I didn't actually go to an actual open day, but, like I was saying before, I care more about getting an idea of the city, and what it's like.

University open days were important for students to acquaint themselves with most universities for the first time. However, for many of them, Oxbridge had already been a part of both their imaginations and their lived realities. Students described enjoyable days spent in Oxford with family or friends. Crucially, some described the benefits of touring around with someone who was an alumnus, which located them in a privileged position in the socio-physical space of Oxford. Arabella related:

I had visited it [Oxford] before the open day, last year, I think, or maybe before. Yes, I had, and I loved it. I thought it was beautiful, I loved it. I visited in winter, and it was…Yes, I loved it so much, I remember thinking how much I loved it. It was just like, I had a really good day there, and I think the day really made the experience better… I went into St Hugh's that day, because the person I was with was in St Hugh's, so we could go inside and stuff. And, I also went into Christ Church, but not all of the colleges were open, obviously. So, I just, kind of, saw the grounds and the city, and I just thought it was amazing. Then, I went to the actual open day, which was a lot more important, yes.

Although Arabella claimed that the 'actual open day' was 'a lot more important', she went on to describe the open day in a comparatively dry way, when contrasted with her 'love' of the day out spent in Oxford prior to the open day. Importantly, Arabella also acknowledged that 'not all of the colleges were open, obviously' and that it was helpful to visit with someone who could gain access 'so we could go inside'. Walled and gated Oxford colleges can often look forbidding, as if designed to keep interlopers out. They often have limited visiting hours designed to protect their students from a constant stream of tourists. Whilst most Oxbridge colleges would welcome a visit from a genuine prospective student, it might not always appear so from the physical exterior looking in, even for privileged students such as those at Trinity. Students were able to navigate this with the help of alumni friends or family members who could confidently tell the college porter that they were connected to the college and thereby easily gain entry.

In sum, students developed a sense of personal, intimate connection to and positive informal experiences of Oxford and Cambridge, compared to other universities, which students only encountered in the context of formal university open days. This familiarity was facilitated by both the school and students' families, and

represented a social dimension to 'concerted cultivation' work. Crucially, this work directed students towards particular destinations—elite universities. Such intimacy and concrete, spatial familiarity with Oxbridge meant that students could more readily conceptualise a sense of affinity between Oxbridge and their own selves. Crucially, it also meant that students were closely connected to Oxbridge-educated teachers, parents, and other mentors who could share practical knowledge and offer support in the process of applying to the universities.

Academic dimension of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work

In addition to organisational and social dimensions, the 'concerted cultivation' work enacted by Trinity School had a clear academic dimension. Within the elite schooling literature, this academic and intellectual facet of students' experiences is surprisingly neglected (see Forbes & Lingard, 2015 and Khan, 2011 for exceptions), and where the topic is analysed, connections are not made in terms of how this concretely positions students advantageously for admission to elite universities. Trinity students were encouraged to develop particular kinds of academic selves that both led them to seek out the particular kind of learning that Oxbridge facilitates, and directly prepared them to be academically competitive applicants. Indeed, rather than be daunted by the academic exclusivity of these institutions, Trinity students came to actively desire to be amongst an exclusive group of students that they regarded as academically 'best'. The mechanisms outlined here at Trinity supported students' senses of a particular kind of academic confidence.

Oxford's website for undergraduate admissions states that the university is looking for candidates that have a 'passion for their chosen course' (University of Oxford, 2017). The university promotes the close academic interaction fostered with other students and with faculty through the tutorial system. (This pedagogic structure is referred to as tutorials in Oxford and supervisions in Cambridge, and will be referred to simply as tutorials in this chapter for brevity). The assumption here is that at Oxford or Cambridge, students will learn with others who are similarly passionate about their chosen subjects.

Trinity School helped students to develop a passion for a particular academic subject, including an interest in a niche area within the subject. Through this work, students became academically confident and began to conceptualise themselves as

specialists, scholars, and even as researchers within the subject. They came to believe that they had a key aspect of what Oxbridge desires—a strong subject passion, and they in turn desired to be surrounded by similarly passionate others in their university experience. Trinity School developed this academic dimension of 'concerted cultivation' in the following ways.

The school had an extensive sixth form enrichment programme, which not only included talks from guest speakers including academics, but also enlisted the school's teachers in delivering presentations about their specialist research areas of interest. Topics ranged from aspects of quantum physics to virtue ethics. Students selected which seminars they wanted to attend based on their interests. The school encouraged students to participate in 'supra-curricular activities'.[4] At the school's sixth form orientation (for both girls new to the school and returning pupils), the Head of Sixth Form made sure that girls were aware of the term 'supra-curricular', and the wealth of opportunities to seek out this kind of learning. The school had a range of academic clubs in which students could partake during their lunch breaks. The clubs were all student-run and ranged from programming robotics to French cinema to feminism. At the sixth form level, most girls were leading the clubs. They decided on the topics of discussion for each week and also invited experts to come and address the club. These clubs were a vehicle for sixth form students to learn to identify niche areas of interest, and pursue them with initiative. As a result, they developed academic confidence.

Whether they were studying for A Levels or the IB Diploma, students were encouraged by their form tutors to take up the opportunity to write an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), for those studying for A Levels, or an Extended Essay, for those studying for the IB. To complete the project, students chose an area within one of their A Level or IB subjects (students often chose the subject which they intended to study at university), and completed an independent research project. For the Extended Essay, students submitted an essay that explicated and argued their findings. For the EPQ, students submitted an essay and also gave a presentation on their findings to their year group, including faculty members. The school's Head of Higher Education reported that the 'majority' of students completed either the EPQ or Extended Essay. In interviews, I spoke with a small number of students who did not

[4] Academic exploration that goes beyond the school syllabus.

complete either an EPQ or an Extended Essay, who felt compelled to explain to me in detail their reasoning as to why they had not taken that route. It was normalised to do such a project. The projects helped students to identify and foster specialised academic interests and to take their first steps towards developing a sense of expertise. They gained confidence as scholars as they produced an academic essay according to university-level specifications. Further, they began to think of themselves as able to speak the fundamental vernacular of the university—that is, research. Khan (2011) and Forbes and Lingard (2015) noted how elite school students articulated an orientation towards research, although they did not focus on the processes through which this was developed. Khan (2011) conceptualised students' academic confidence as the 'audacity' to 'think big' and wrestle with ambitious philosophical, interdisciplinary questions (p. 160). However, rather than an emphasis on expansiveness and breadth, at Trinity I found an emphasis on tightly defined areas of specialisation and academic depth. It is significant that the emphasis in academic formation at Trinity corresponded clearly to the admissions criteria at Oxbridge.

It is as a result of this academic facet of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work that it became highly probable that Trinity students would develop the passion for their university subject(s) which Oxbridge admissions tutors valued. They developed the academic confidence to conceptualise themselves as apprentice specialists, scholars, and researchers who not only felt able to engage in academic conversations with the 'best and the brightest' in their fields (University of Oxford, 2017), but who actively desired to do this.

Whilst I was conducting this research, the school's Head Girl team produced a new promotional video for the school's website. They wanted to do this to foreground students' own voices and perspectives. They knew that the main audience of the website would be students and their families who were considering applying to Trinity. The video was composed entirely of quotes from students about their school experience. The importance of developing an academic passion was a key theme of the video. Students themselves clearly valued this. In the video students enthusiastically extorted prospective Trinity students to 'find your little niche thing that you're interested in', and to 'spend time on your passion, do your thing, like Mary loves Chemistry, and Bella loves French, debating, and politics', said a student gesturing to her friends at the lunch table.

As the university applications process began in earnest in the summer term of the Lower Sixth year, the school put structures in place for students to continue to explore these 'supra-curricular' interests in another formal capacity. University Preparation classes, referred to by students as 'Uni Prep' saw students divided up by the subjects to which they are applying at university (e.g. History, Medicine etc.). Before students began to draft their personal statements, the classes ensured that students were familiar with the syllabi of the university courses to which they were applying. Teachers also suggested 'outside reading' for the students (that is, reading outside the normal school syllabus for that subject), according to students' specific interests within the subject. In this way, students were explicitly encouraged to think beyond the remit of their school syllabi and develop specialised interests within an academic discipline, which they then pursued via outside reading. Students devoted time during the summer holidays between the Lower Sixth and Upper Sixth years to outside reading, I learned as students detailed to me their summer plans. A student applying to study anthropology explained that she took home fifteen books from the school library to read.

In turn, outside reading is an important signal to Oxford and Cambridge universities that a student is sufficiently passionate about her subject and self-directed in her studies to thrive in the tutorial system. Such is the importance of outside reading to admissions tutors, that some Oxbridge colleges' access divisions have created suggested outside reading lists according to different subjects, available on their websites. The aim of these free and publicly available lists is to help students from less well-resourced schools who have less experience of preparing students for Oxbridge entrance. However, teachers in Trinity's Uni Prep classes went a step beyond to help students find outside reading tailored to the students' own developing academic interests and specialisms. Students explained to me how outside reading texts were recommended to them by their teachers, and students viewed these recommendations as valuable.

Upper Sixth student Arabella, applying to study French and Arabic at Oxford, explained that her teachers were able to recommend French and Arabic novels that she read and then cited in her personal statement. Teachers were viewed as having relevant subject-specific knowledge to help students find readings that would allow them to explore their interests further. In the sciences, students were even encouraged

to read academic journal articles to engage with the latest work in the field. Cora, applying to study Medicine at Cambridge explained:

We were doing stem cells in class, and I'd been looking into therapies, and I'd read a book about finding new ways of making drugs, and stuff. And, they were talking about making…because, there's a lot of problems with making your own stem cells…Then, the name [of a scientist] came up, and he'd been mentioned in other places, and I just thought it would be really interesting to read the actual paper that he wrote, when he discovered his cells. And, we were being encouraged to read more academic material at school…like, scientific research papers, properly hard, way beyond A Level, sort of stuff.

Further, Cora related that teachers encouraged students to pursue outside reading as a way to 'extend yourself' and develop an in-depth 'area of expertise', or specialisation within a subject.

In addition to possessing a 'passion for their chosen course', Oxford's website for undergraduate admissions states that 'if you like to think for yourself, Oxford could be the right university for you' (University of Oxford, 2017). Trinity School shaped students who identified with this statement. As previously outlined, the school helped students to develop a budding expertise in a niche area of academic interest, and gave them opportunities to do independent work in these areas. Further, students were particularly encouraged to think critically and express their arguments, and were provided with many avenues through which to do so. On my many visits to the school I was often struck by the nature of the posters on the wall advertising lunch club talks. About two weeks after the contentious US presidential election of Donald Trump the History Society invited students to discuss over sandwiches, 'Has the US ever really been a united country? A historical analysis'. The Head Girl team's video on the school website touted all of the opportunities for students to express themselves academically. One student mentioned that she loves 'public speaking and debating' clubs. Another enthused, 'I love that we have so many opportunities to debate—whether that's with your house, with your year, with teachers when you're trying to prove that you're right!' The sixth form section of the school's website also mentioned the importance of 'vigorous debate' as part of the culture of the sixth form.

As a result of these opportunities to practice expressing their views and the institutional value placed upon this, Trinity students developed an affinity with the Oxbridge tutorial model of learning, as it sees students interacting directly with senior faculty in small groups or even one-to-one. Moreover, and as the previous section illustrated, students had ample opportunity to develop a sense of familiarity with this context.

Learning

Many students' rationales for directing applications to Oxbridge stemmed from the particular kind of learning that the universities make possible, a kind of learning which these students actively came to desire. Trinity School provided opportunities for close interaction with teachers in small classes, and facilitated bespoke attention and care for individual students as they navigated the university applications process. Students were accustomed to an intimate, individualised kind of learning and mentorship, the kind that is also found in the small collegiate communities and the tutorial pedagogies at Oxford and Cambridge. Whilst Khan (2011) noted that the elite American school he studied emphasised a seminar-based style of learning, it is important to make explicit the correspondence between the intimate style of learning fostered at Trinity and the tutorial structure of undergraduate learning at the UK's most elite universities. Further, as outlined previously, Trinity students were guided to develop a 'subject passion' and to begin to conceptualise themselves as specialists, scholars, and even as researchers. Many of these students therefore desired to attend Oxford or Cambridge as they regarded the two universities as synonymous with a kind of serious academic life, which they contrasted with other universities that were perceived more as places to 'have fun'.

Clara, applying to study Human, Social, and Political Sciences (HSPS) with a concentration in Anthropology at Cambridge, related the experience of a Trinity student she knew in the year above who had gone on to study at Edinburgh, a well-regarded Russell Group university, and had been disappointed with what she perceived as a lack of academic seriousness:

And she was just like, no-one really cared about the subject, everyone cared about having fun ... which is fair enough, but if you're going to a uni like Edinburgh, Leeds

or Bristol, you have to expect those people ... my two best friends, they're doing Geography, but they don't really want to do Geography...My friend was like, I don't really care about Geography, I'm just going to uni to have fun. But it's different for me, because I'm going to uni to actually learn about my subjects.

For Clara, Cambridge represented the promise of motivated peers who wanted to learn and were passionate about their subjects. There was an implicit assumption here that by virtue of making it through the multi-stage Oxbridge admissions process, which included an interview with a subject tutor, students would have proved they were passionate about their subject and committed to scholarship. However, it is important to note that Clara contrasted her academic expectations with those of some of her 'best friends' who were also students at Trinity. These students, it seems, were not particularly engaged with their degree subject, but prioritised 'having fun' at university. Therefore, Clara explained, Oxbridge would not be a good fit for them academically. It is important to acknowledge that not all Trinity students shared the desire to attend Oxbridge. However, the academic dimension of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work facilitated movement towards these locations. Students, such as Clara's best friends, could reject this navigational work, but they were nevertheless in dialogue with it.

Clara explained why Cambridge appealed to her:

I think just the fact that people go there that want to learn. And I want to be around people who want to learn, that are like me, I don't ... like the girl that [I was talking to at Edinburgh], I want to be somewhere where everyone's actually interested in the subject, and that actually wants to work…I want to get the best education that I can ... and Cambridge is the best. It is ... bad as that seems, it is.

Clara clearly perceived an Oxbridge education to be of a higher quality academically than even other Russell Group universities—she described it as the 'best education' that she could obtain.

Cora, applying to Cambridge to study medicine, stated of the Cambridge course that is was 'probably a more academic course than you'd find at other places, if that appeals to you, and it appeals to me'. She explained what she liked about the specifics of the course:

Then, Cambridge, I really like the course, and especially the third year. The third year, where you do a science degree, the Cambridge one was the best third year, I think...So, the first two years you do, like, Biomedical Science, and then the third year you specialise in your own particular area, and you can make it quite research based, or you could just do, like, History of Neuroscience. Then, you get a bachelor's degree at the end of your third year in your specific area, and then you go on to do your three years clinical, and then you get your medical degree. So, UCL do that as well, but Cambridge's options, and the amount of research you can do in that third year, was just, sort of, a level above. And, I think, having research as part of the degree was also something that I quite wanted.

Cora's academic self-concept was one of a budding researcher, reinforced by the academic dimension of 'concerted cultivation' at Trinity. She placed more value on research-based options, which she contrasted with 'just' studying the history of a discipline (in this case neuroscience). Cora described the research opportunities at Cambridge as a 'level above' that of UCL, another extremely highly regarded Russell Group university.

Students also articulated the appeal of the tutorial system. Clara explained:

I think it's because you're learning from just the top academics, really, or learning from the people ... you're not...people aren't teaching you the books. The people that wrote the books are teaching you. So you're getting real proper...they just have the best teachers, and I really want to learn from the best, because I want to maximise my options.

Oxbridge faculty, as well as students, were naturally assumed to be 'the best'. Further, the tutorial system was seen to offer close pedagogic interaction with them. This close interaction was seen as desirable, as Celia, applying to study History at Oxford describes:

I just think the style of teaching is so different from any other university…just more, sort of like, intimate, sessions where you can actually have more proper discussions.

And, my brother did History at Durham, and he said he found it quite difficult because he, basically, had so much free time, so he found it really hard to keep motivated and work out of his own accord. Whereas, at Oxford, I feel like you just have to, there's no option. But, that is, kind of appealing though, because I like the idea of being motivated to do something, and having set things that I have to go and do.

According to Celia, the tutorial system seemed to guarantee a level of academic rigour. It also seemed to mirror the high level of academic structure the students currently experienced at Trinity School. Even highly regarded Russell Group universities, such as Durham, Leeds, and Bristol were seen by these students to lack a sufficiently serious academic atmosphere:

Well, more generally, I've heard that, other than Oxford and Cambridge, putting them aside, most of the UK universities are pretty laid back or, obviously, university is meant to be fun. Leeds, I heard is more of a party place, if you want to go out it's good.
-Celia

I just kind of...I knew the stereotypes, [so each of us do like] Leeds and like Bristol are very party-like, drug-like, very...and I like going out, I love it, but then again, I just don't really know how much I want to go out every night, because I know myself, and whenever I'm in that situation, I feel pressured to go out, and I go out…And I didn't want to have that every night…
-Clara

It was striking that Russell Group universities that were ranked highly in university league tables were still regarded by these students as 'laid back', 'fun', or even a 'party place'. Students had high expectations for their academic engagement at university, borne out of academic 'concerted cultivation' at Trinity. Further, they could point to measurable differences in academic structure that distinguished Oxford and Cambridge, mainly tutorial teaching via a collegiate academic and social structure. They saw these structures as better able to meet their academic needs and therefore more desirable.

Challenge and exclusivity

As the school fostered students' subject 'passions' and ability to 'think for yourself", it also emboldened them with an appetite for academic challenge. This in turn led them to desire Oxbridge admission in order to be challenged at what they perceived to be the highest level. The school placed a strong emphasis on challenge. Their website promoted the fact that students went on to attend 'challenging universities' around the world. The school's Deputy Head organised an annual Challenge Week, where students were encouraged to do activities where they could practice failing and bouncing back subsequently to try again. Students could attempt to ride a bicycle that had been constructed backwards, for example. According to the Deputy Head, the week was 'about making the most of new opportunities, trying something new and not worrying about it going wrong'. At Trinity, students not only developed academic dispositions that made academic and university admissions success likely, but the school inculcated in them a certain level of comfort with and confidence in their abilities to seek out and meet new challenges. In the case of university applications, the extra demands required of Oxbridge applicants represented such a challenge they wished to attempt.

The Oxbridge applications process involved more stages than that of other UK universities. Oxbridge applicants faced any combination (or perhaps all) of these assessments: subject-specific examinations, submission of written work, and an interview with a subject tutor. Every stage was also an opportunity to cull students further. As the application process made more demands on students than that of other universities, and there were more hurdles at which one could potentially fall, students perceived successful applicants to be part of a special, exclusive group of the most academically able students. Because admission was so exclusive compared to other universities, it made the universities on the other side in turn seem like more appealing prizes.

The school's Oxbridge coordinator related to me that Durham University had recently introduced admissions testing in Maths. He wondered if more universities might introduce admissions testing, or perhaps even admissions interviewing, in the mould of Oxford or Cambridge. He argued that this would make them more appealing

to students like those at Trinity:

And I wonder whether at some stage there will be also wider and more stringent interviewing. Because what I've always said all along is that Oxford and Cambridge owe, you know, their reputation to a range of factors, some of which, you know, involved the achievement of their alumni and things like that, and the quality of their teaching, but one factor is the rigour of the admissions process. You feel like you've been through the wringer and you've come out the other side and they've said, yes, you're good enough. And I feel that if all the top unis were using interviews and testing and then awarding places on the basis of that, they would make the process of getting a place so much more inherently impressive and important to the students that there wouldn't be quite this dichotomy. Because you can get a place at Oxford but you wouldn't get a place at Durham, because you messed up their entrance exam and not come across well at interview.

In my interviews with students, I expected to find more scepticism about the objectivity of the Oxbridge admissions process, particularly the ability of the interview structure to identify the 'best' students. Instead, there seemed to be a trust in and in some cases a reverence of the screening process. Amelia explained to me that she had wanted to apply to Oxford because it would be a 'challenge'. She detailed:

Because you have to do all the admissions tests and then the interviews, and they have so many people applying for a place. There's so many people who want to go there, so it means that you have to be really good in order to get in. Because they have to choose the people who they...the best people, probably, and because so many people apply, it's really hard to be among the best.

It is notable that Amelia assumed that those who were selected through this process were 'the best people', and she desired to be among them. Like many students in elite schools, Amelia did not reflect on the privileges that strengthened her candidacy, and the admissions process as a whole was assumed to be a largely meritocratic one (Khan, 2011; Van Zanten, 2015).

Oxbridge's perceived academic exclusivity deterred few Trinity students from making an application. In many cases, its exclusivity was a large part of its appeal.

The school's academic 'concerted cultivation' facilitated a belief among its students that, although exclusive, Oxbridge was not too exclusive for them to entertain in their horizon of possibilities. Students mentioned that they chose to apply for a 'challenge'. They wanted to take this on because Trinity has imbued its students with academic confidence and an appetite for challenge. Some students were more ambivalent, but the default mode was to apply, rather than not apply. Said Celia, applying to read History at Oxford:

I just thought, why not give it a go, you know. I know that it's so competitive, and I really don't have high expectations, but I just thought I might as well try.

Celia maintained that she did not have 'high expectations', yet she still perceived submitting an application to be plausible, and that she 'might as well try'.

In sum, students came to desire the particular kind of learning that Oxbridge facilitated, a kind of learning with which these students developed a strong degree of familiarity with, through academic 'concerted cultivation' at Trinity School. They also came to actively desire to be amongst an exclusive group of students that were regarded as academically 'best', and were not daunted by such exclusivity. The mechanisms outlined here at Trinity supported students' confidence in their ability to meet academic challenges, and even instilled a confidence in their ability to endure the possibility of rejection, through the resilience work that the school emphasised.

Discussion

I have explicated here how the elite school enacts 'concerted cultivation' work that, crucially, also moves students in clearly directed ways towards particular elite university destinations. The organisational, social, and academic facets of the ways in which students were positioned and resourced to move effectively towards elite educational destinations have been analysed here.

Organisationally, the school dedicated significant resources of time and energy to Oxbridge applicants, and imposed a highly structured university applications process to help students meet the particular demands of applying to those universities. This in turn made applications to Oxbridge a normalised part of ordinary life at Trinity School.

Socially, students received practical direction-finding advice and support from teachers and older students who had attended or been admitted to these universities, which concurrently fostered a sense of connection and belonging in relation to Oxbridge. As outlined in Chapter 3, the social and affective resources that elite schools provide their students have been under theorised with regard to their concrete implications for the reproduction of privilege through elite university admissions (Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009; Khan 2011). Here I have explicated the processes by which the biographies of elite school teachers, and the trajectories of older students were deployed to advantage Trinity students in university admissions. Importantly, similar 'concerted cultivation' work was also fostered by students' families, although conflicts emerged between the emphasis that some parents desired to place on Oxbridge, and the way that the school signalled value.

Academically, students came to think about their learning at Trinity in particular ways that reflected the expectations for a successful Oxbridge candidate. The analysis of this academic and intellectual facet of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work, and its concrete implications for advantage in university admissions, marks a further important contribution to the extant elite schooling literature, outlined in Chapter 3. Trinity students were encouraged to develop particular kinds of academic selves that both led them to seek out the particular kind of learning that Oxbridge facilitates, and directly prepared them to be academically competitive applicants to Oxbridge and to other elite Russell Group universities. The school shaped their emerging identities as scholars in their disciplines, as well as fostered an appetite for challenge and a desire for academic exclusivity, borne out of this particular kind of academic confidence. I showed how Trinity students came to actively desire to be amongst an exclusive group of students that they regarded as academically 'best'. Importantly, students did not reflect on the privileges that strengthened their respective candidacies, and the admissions process as a whole was assumed to be a largely meritocratic one (Khan, 2011; Van Zanten, 2015).

Chapter 6: Dealing with challenges as students and parents negotiate the university applications process

Introduction

This chapter analyses how students, parents, and private tutors worked 'in concert' with the school to negotiate university admissions. The complexity of this collective work is attended to, with areas of agreement as well as conflict among the multiple actors. The cases of three particular mothers are presented—Alice, Lisa, and Frances—these mothers' different approaches, tensions, and struggles illustrate the range of ways that parents work 'in concert' with their children, the school, and private tutors to negotiate university admissions. The barriers that parents faced in their efforts to support their children are brought to the fore, and the role of private tutors in remedying these issues are also elaborated.

Moreover, the chapter analyses how students learned to enact 'concerted cultivation' work for themselves, as they negotiated power structures both inside and outside the school. In this vein, the particular cases of two students, Amelia and Arabella, are analysed. Attention is also paid to affective inequality amongst affluent White students within the school, using the particular cases of two students, Clara and Samantha, to show how students' varying levels of confidence and self-belief shaped the efficacy of their attempts to meet their desired aims within the school context. The ways in which private tutors helped address these issues are also elaborated.

'Mother work'

In almost all of the families that participated in the study, mothers, rather than fathers, took a lead role in managing their children's educational journeys. Some devoted considerable time and energy to this, although some actively chose not to engage intensively in this work. The findings presented here outline variation amongst affluent White parents at the school in terms of the extent to which they deployed 'concerted cultivation' strategies. First, it is important to identify the gendered nature of this form of parental labour, a dynamic that resonates across many different contexts of affluent parenting (Ball, 2003; Hamilton, 2016; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2007; Van Zanten, 2015; Vincent, 2017; Weis et al., 2014). In most Trinity families, fathers were employed in time-intensive, high-income positions

in banking, private equity, and corporate law, with some in the real estate development and technology sectors. Many of the mothers were not employed outside the home, some engaged in significant volunteer work, some were employed part-time, and many were self-employed where they owned a small business or consultancy. The families' material affluence created conditions where many of the mothers, in the absence of engagement in the labour market, had significant time and energy available which they directed towards managing their children's educational trajectories to varying degrees, as I will discuss in this chapter.

The gendered division of labour seemed to be taken for granted and was not reflected upon by the participants. However, Alice, the mother of Charlotte, applying to study Medicine at Oxford, was notably outspoken about the dynamics at play as an upper-middle class mother of children at independent schools in London. Alice expressed a strong dislike of the hive of very involved mothers that frequented school events and that inhabited her affluent neighbourhood. 'There's always school talk, wherever I go', she explained with a strong degree of resignation. Alice and other parents described this kind of 'talk' as including discussions about which universities their children were applying to, with a particular focus on Oxford and Cambridge, the open days parents had attended, and if the students and parents had been happy with the school's predicted grades, or if they had needed to negotiate to raise them. Alice and others encountered this school talk while attending parent coffee mornings at the school, but also while watching their children compete in sporting events at the school, and at times even while walking the dog in their neighbourhood.

Alice admitted that she started to avoid certain events, like parent coffee mornings, because of the 'school talk' that she knew would go on there. However, other parents voiced the importance of frequenting these spaces to exchange information with other parents, and parents who did not feel connected with other parents at the school reported that they felt insecure about this and wondered if their children were disadvantaged by it. In the next section, the different parenting approaches of three particular mothers, Alice, Lisa, and Frances are analysed.

Different approaches: Alice, Lisa, and Frances

While Lareau (2011) and others who have deployed the concept of 'concerted cultivation' point to parenting strategies that fall along class (Vincent, 2017) and race-based lines (Manning, 2019), this research found other important differences amongst affluent White parents at the school in terms of the extent to which they deployed concerted cultivation strategies. This variation is outlined here through the examples of three mothers—Alice, Lisa, and Frances.

Alice and Lisa are notable cases as they were the only parents in the study who had experienced mobility from working class or lower-middle class backgrounds to the upper-middle class during their life course. They were more conflicted than those born in the upper-middle class regarding going beyond the school's provision to pay for extra university preparation resources, such as subject tutoring and admissions test and interview preparation. They were also less likely to directly intervene in managing the applications process, which they believed should be left to their daughters and the school. They valued promoting the independence of their child, and placed relatively more trust in the school, which resonated with other accounts of working-class parents (Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2008).

It is important to note that almost all participants voiced feeling conflicted about to what extent to provide extra resources for their children beyond what the school provided. However, parents who had experienced social mobility over their life course agonised more, and articulated these tensions more readily.

Frances was notable amongst participants in the extent to which she micro-managed her daughter's university applications, in a similar vein to Weis et al.'s findings (2014). Although her comprehensive involvement was more intensive than other parents, facets of the way in which she intervened in the process resonated through the accounts of other parents.

Alice

Alice grew up in a working class community in the North of England. She attended a grammar school, and then moved to the greater London area where she trained as a midwife. She was no longer employed outside the home, and her husband worked in real estate development. Both Alice and her husband were English. The family had four children, all of whom attended independent day schools in London, of

whom sixth former Charlotte was the eldest. Like most Trinity families, they lived in an affluent, leafy London neighbourhood.

Alice was outgoing and well-connected in the community, but still described feeling like an outsider reflecting on the privilege that surrounded her. She was concerned that her children know the value of money, and develop a strong work ethic. She was also concerned that they learn to be independent. In accounts of affluent parenting this value is rarely mentioned, with more emphasis on parents' active intervention in students' lives. However, Van Zanten's (2015) study of Parisian elites is a notable exception, where parents tried to foster their children's sense of independence. She described with pride how Charlotte had participated in a World Challenge expedition through the school to Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands. She had insisted that Charlotte earn the money for the trip herself, which cost £5,000. While other students' parents wrote a cheque for the sum, or had combined parental contributions with gentle fundraising such as cake sales, Charlotte worked various part-time jobs including waitressing, dog walking, and selling coffee in her neighbourhood every weekend. Alice valued this for her daughter as a means to ensure that she was independent and resilient. On the trip itself, Charlotte and the other students were responsible for their own itinerary, accommodation, transport, budget, and for preparing all food. 'They'll be in good stead for university with all those skills', Alice explained.

Alice also described real constraints on their spending as a family, pointing to the fact that her husband was self-employed, and the family spent most of their income on private school fees for their four children. She described forgoing expensive vacations as a family, as an example of ways that the family curtailed their spending that she argued stood in contrast to many of their friends and neighbours. Instilling a strong sense of independence in her daughter was clearly very important to Alice alongside ensuring she had the best educational start.

'There's a lot of peer pressure on parents'

Alice contrasted her involvement with Charlotte's university applications process with other parents whose excessive involvement, she opined, ranged from attending open days with their daughters, to writing their personal statements for their applications. She lamented that 'there's a lot of peer pressure on parents' to assist

students in the process themselves, and to provide extra paid subject tuition and admissions test and interview preparation.

In particular, she pointed to how she perceived that students applying to study Medicine were advantaged in the process when they had parents who were doctors themselves. 'Its not about how smart you are, it's about the strategy', she argued. Alice was aware of the strategy involved in positioning students for success in the university applications process, but she largely considered this work to be within the remit of her daughter and the school, and was worried about becoming too intensely invested in the details of the process herself as a parent, lest it undermine the development of her daughter's burgeoning independence.

Alice valued her daughter's independence in the university applications process, which was largely self-directed and handled between Charlotte and the school. However, like all of the Trinity parent participants, Alice ensured that she was informed about the specific university courses to which Charlotte was considering applying, and their relative strengths and weaknesses in terms of fit for Charlotte. As she was applying to study Medicine, the courses varied in their emphases on early clinical training. As a former midwife, Alice was able to and did draw on her own experience of medical training to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of the courses with Charlotte. Although Alice could not offer the same fine-grained insights as parents who had trained as doctors, she deployed the relevant subject-specific knowledge she did have from her own experience to assist her daughter in making her choices about courses.

Alice contrasted herself as a mother with other mothers who were more involved. 'There's a lot of parental input around here', she noted. She described a mother of three children that she knew who had been a barrister but had given up her job to 'sort her children out'. Her eldest child was now at Cambridge. Alice described her as a 'very together, strong lady'. Removed from her legal career, she now applied herself to monitoring and shaping her children's educational trajectories. Alice noted that the woman said matter-of-factly of her second child, 'I'll be writing his personal statement', suggesting that he probably was not up to the task. Alice viewed this as an intervention too far in this process, and expressed some distaste for mothers whose primary identities centred around facilitating their children's educational advancement.

Alice pointed to other examples of parents in jobs 'where you're a bit of a wordsmith' such as barristers, who stepped in to assist students with personal statement writing. She expressed reservations about when students would learn to be self-sufficient, pointing to the example of another mother she says wrote her daughter's undergraduate dissertation for her. 'I'm not surprised', Alice said, 'Its just sad that I'm not surprised'. She was critical of the practices of other affluent parents that surrounded her, and asserted her own agency to reject these, at least in part.

However, this did not mean that Alice did not attempt to assist her daughter with any substantive academic work. Instead, she weighed in when she thought it appropriate to help. Like most Trinity students, Charlotte was writing an EPQ. She had chosen to research sudden cardiac death in young athletes. Alice expressed to Charlotte that 'you've got so much on your plate' and that she wanted to help her with research for her EPQ. 'I said, tell me what you want researching and I can look it up and print it out'. However, Charlotte resisted the help. Alice explained, 'But we haven't even got to that, because she says, 'Oh, I've read it, don't worry'. Nevertheless, Alice described continuing to set aside relevant newspaper articles for Charlotte and bringing them to her attention—'Every time there's something in the paper, I rip the page out and say, you have to quote it, here's another one…' In this way, Alice felt that she was easing Charlotte's burden somewhat, yet in a way that did not compromise her ethical principles, such as writing the EPQ for her.

Alice also advised Charlotte on ways to strategically use her EPQ to fortify her CV. She suggested that Charlotte consider creating an 'outcome' from the essay where she could partner with Trinity to bring preventative screening for the cardiac condition to the students at the school. Alice mentioned that she knew of a charity that did the screening at other schools, and she surmised that Charlotte could easily implement this at Trinity. Alice deployed relevant strategic information to help position her daughter more favourably as an impressive prospective university applicant.

Alice's decision about whether to attend university open days with her daughter encapsulated some of the tensions and pressures that she felt as a parent. On the one hand, she wanted to foster Charlotte's independence. On the other hand, she was aware that many students' parents were attending the open days and she worried that she would miss out on gathering important information that could help guide her daughter. The strategic emphasis that parents placed upon attending university visits

is articulated in other accounts of affluent parenting (Lareau, 2011; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014). Alice described these pressures:

I've got a friend whose daughter also wants to do medicine, so I'm like, oh, God, I don't want to hear the comparison. And she [was driving by recently and pulled over] at the side of the road, and she wound the window down, and she said, "So, what open days have you booked?" And I thought, that sentence is so wrong. "You".

Alice was troubled by some parents' sense of ownership of their sixth formers' applications process. She added that 'a lot of the mums are going to go with their daughters. I've had e-mails saying, anybody else doing this, or shall we all... who wants to come too? I'm like, no, Charlotte can go. That's why we bought a railcard. You know. She can find friends to go with, but I really don't think ... unless she really needs me to go'.

Alice insisted on her daughter's independence in the process, and she pointed to these pressures as unique to London parents. She contrasted this with the experience of friends who were raising children outside of London, and noted that the parents she knew there did not go with their sixth formers to open days. 'It's the London mums that want to go with their daughters'. When I asked why this was the case Alice replied:

It's to check they don't miss seeing the right thing, or put your name down for the right accommodation. It's like the boarding schools…our friends who've got kids who are at boarding school, and for them, it's all like, have you got the right school...but have you got the right house? And so you can get to the boarding school, but are you in the right house once you're there? And it's like, what? How? How would you know? So will somebody tell us when we've got it right? Have I ruined them for life because they're in the wrong boarding house?...

Although Charlotte was navigating university choices and not boarding schools, Alice had misgivings that she might be missing out on privileged knowledge that was deemed to be important to her daughter's future success. Although she did not feel like an 'insider' in affluent circles, she had spent significant time in these circles and was aware of what other privileged parents were attuned to, such as the status

gradations of the ‘right’ boarding house or university accommodation, as the case might be. However, importantly, she also sarcastically questioned whether the downside of operating without this knowledge, such as of a preferred accommodation option, would actually ‘ruin them for life’.

Tutoring

Alice was uncomfortable with the fact that parents’ interventions also included contracting with expensive private tutors and educational consultants, a practice noted by accounts of affluent parenting in other contexts (for example, see Sun & Smith, 2017 and Weis et al., 2014 in a US context, and Ying & Wright, 2021 in a Chinese context). She explained that another mother, when she found out that Charlotte was applying to study Medicine, mentioned that her neighbour consults with applicants to medical courses. ‘If you want to I can give you her number, because she sees people’, the woman said. Alice knew that some students were working with advisors who coached them on ‘what to say in applications, what to say in interviews’. However, she asserted that she was confident enough in Charlotte’s ability, and the school’s preparation for applicants to Medicine, and she had misgivings about justifying the amount of money required for extra tuition.

However, Alice described having intermittent doubts about whether she was doing enough as a parent, and whether her daughter would be at a disadvantage as a result. She related how Charlotte, who was performing well in chemistry, was asked matter-of-factly by a classmate after a recent test, ‘Who’s your chemistry tutor?’ The statement assumed that Charlotte had a tutor, and made assumptions about the relationship between tutoring and high academic performance. Alice said that when her daughter related the conversation to her, they ‘laughed about it’, but then they did look at each other and say, ‘Does that mean everyone has got one?’

Intervening with teachers and the school

With regard to how she interacted with teachers and school administrators concerning her daughter’s academic progress, Alice described herself as somewhere in the middle of a spectrum, where she viewed the teachers as equals, not superior to her nor inferior:

My mother would have been more kowtowing to a teacher. I won't go to that, so I'm

all right, I've already been lifted out of that one. By...I don't know, time, place, I don't know. So I feel I'm there as an equal, but I'm doing my bit. They're the teachers, I'm not a teacher. I wouldn't tell them what to do, because it's not my expertise. But I do see people start expecting a lot more, as if it is a contract.

Alice positioned herself between her working-class mother who would have 'kowtow[ed]' to teachers, and the affluent parents in her current circles who viewed themselves as paying customers or clients in an almost 'contract[ual]' relationship in which teachers needed to deliver certain educational outcomes. Many parents voiced the dynamics that Alice did, although most in less forthright terms.

Alice opined that 'I wouldn't want to be a teacher around here', in the competitive London independent school environment. She noted that teachers are 'not dealing with just teaching lessons', but dealing with parents that are highly 'emotional[ly]' invested in their children's education, 'with purchasing power, with very high expectations'. She described other parents as 'taking on the role where they are nearly the experts' vis a vis the teachers, and that 'because they are paying for it, they are the boss'.

There was a clear sense of entitlement amongst fee-paying parents that they could expect certain academic outcomes, and their own biographies often reflected high academic achievement and elite university attendance. Many who had attended university in the UK considered themselves to be knowledgeable about elite admissions processes, and therefore able to micro-manage the process if they chose to, second-guessing the school's provision at times.

However, Alice did not identify with this sense of entitlement, and her biography did not reflect elite educational and professional achievement, although the family was financially affluent. Alice viewed these entitled parenting practices as stemming from the increasing proportion of mothers who were 'businesswomen' or former businesswomen, who she argued brought the mindset and approaches that led them to be successful executives to their parenting. She asserted that these mothers were used to being in 'control', where 'what you say goes at work'. Alice contrasted this with her own view that much of the process was out of her control, and in the hands of her daughter's own effort and ability. However, she imagined that for other parents the lack of control was difficult to accept, especially 'if you control everything else in your life, which so many people round here do...there are a lot of

working mums...I say working mums, but it's both parents working...and you do 'to do' lists at work, and it gets done to a high standard...why can't that be like that at school?'

She surmised that this, in turn, shaped how these parents 'relate to the school,' where parents think 'you've got my daughter, she's meant to be able to get As, Bs, whatever it is, right, that's the contract. It's nearly like it's a contract. And that's what they've paid for. They're paying for it'. Although Alice was paying school fees, she did not feel entitled to certain academic outcomes, and she again emphasised the role that her own daughter played in the process, and her relative trust in the school's university preparation provision.

Lisa

Like Alice, Lisa grew up in a working class community in the North of England and attended a grammar school. However, her family was unusual within their community in that she was the daughter of a Cambridge-educated Church of England vicar, who driven by his desire to live like the parish he served, chose to raise the children in a working class community. As a young adult, Lisa moved to the greater London area to study law at a Russell Group university and trained as a solicitor. She was working part time, and her husband worked in private equity. Both Lisa and her husband were English. They lived in an affluent London neighbourhood.

The family had three children, of whom sixth former Cora was the middle child. Cora attended a state Church of England school before joining Trinity in Year 10, later than the standard entry point of Year 7. Cora's older brother went on to study Politics at a Russell Group university, so the family had navigated the university applications process before, although this was the first time they have navigated it at Trinity.

Like Alice, Lisa placed measured trust in the school's provision, and did not micro-manage the university preparation process. However, she was well informed about her daughter's preparation, and the different universities she was considering to study Medicine. Cora was applying to Cambridge and other Russell Group universities. Lisa described the school as 'a really safe pair of hands' and 'steady ship' in the university guidance process. Importantly, she was able to draw on her own experience of applying to and attending a Russell Group university to support

this assessment of the school's provision. She also reflected that as her daughter was applying to study Medicine, an area outside of her and her husband's own professional knowledge (in law and finance respectively), she was happy to lean on the school's provision.

Supplementing the school's provision

Unlike Alice, Lisa did not reject all extra paid support outside of the school's university preparation provision, but she did reject some opportunities for this. She set limits and constantly assessed whether she perceived that the extra preparation was really needed, or if she deemed it to be excessive. This resonates with more general accounts of conflictedness among some wealthy families regarding the justification of material spending (see Sherman, 2017). For instance, Lisa decided not to pay for extra Oxbridge interview preparation beyond what the school offered. These extra services ranged from one-day interview workshops with Oxbridge graduates to weekend residential courses. The one-day interview workshop through a private company was advertised through the school. The cost of the course was £400 for individual participants, but a group reduced rate was available to Trinity pupils who signed up for the workshop, where the cost would be £100 per person.

Lisa did not think that this would be value for money, even at the reduced rate. She reported that 'the school really seem to know what they're doing' and that she was satisfied with the amount of preparation that Cora had already had at school. She was worried that with additional tuition Cora could be in danger of 'over prepping' for the interview. Lisa advocated a balance and was comfortable with a sense of being 'well prepped enough', without going to extremes, as she saw it.

However, Lisa did pay for extra practice materials for Cora for the UCAT (University Clinical Aptitude Test) admissions examination, which cost £60. Lisa explained that was because she 'felt it was giving her the best opportunity to do well in that particular exam'. Even though the school had provided workshops and practice test sessions, in this case Lisa judged extra practice materials to be helpful.

However, like Alice, Lisa did have doubts about her decisions. She wondered if 'Maybe I'm just naïve, and I should invest. It's difficult, because you want to give her all of the opportunities'. She went on to assert her desire to 'keep it real', hoping that her decisions were 'sensible' rather than 'naïve'. However, she already had a

backup plan in mind if she had a change of heart. She hedged her desire to curtail extra tuition by noting that her friend's daughter was an Oxford graduate who conducted practice interviews for a private company. 'I suppose, I've always got that backing, I could ask my friend's daughter, if I suddenly thought, we should do it', Lisa noted.

Unlike Alice, Lisa experienced less 'peer pressure' from other parents. She explained that as Cora had joined the school later, in Year 10, she had 'missed the boat' on getting to know many other Trinity parents in the years when parents were still shepherding their daughters to and from friend's houses, and getting to know other parents that way. Lisa also found herself outside longstanding groups of friends that 'have come up through the prep schools together, and so have known each other for years', as Cora attended a Church of England school that did not send many students to Trinity.

However, Lisa articulated some pressures regarding attending open days with her daughter. She felt uncomfortable with the new norm of parents attending, but decided to go with Cora anyway because she noted that 'everybody else does it' and because of 'fear of missing out'. She explained that her own parents had not come on open days with her and that 'it feels kind of weird'. However, despite her misgivings about doing, Lisa framed the time as a chance to have quality time with Cora: 'We had quite a nice day really…It's just nice having time with one child, frankly, we had a bit of a giggle', she said.

Frances

Frances was raised in a wealthy family in Europe and attended independent schools. She studied engineering at university but 'didn't practice'. She owned a small educational business based in London and in the Middle East. The business offered subject tuition for British expatriate students in the Middle East, and arts enrichment for students in both locations. Her husband, who was American, was a senior executive at a technology company. They had one child together, their daughter Arabella. Like most Trinity families, they lived in an affluent London neighbourhood.

Intensive involvement: 'I'm sort of her PA'

Unlike Alice and Lisa, Frances was heavily involved in the work of her daughter's university applications process, and she was comfortable assuming this orientation towards the process. This orientation is reflected in dominant accounts of affluent parenting (Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Weis et al., 2014). 'I'm sort of her PA', Frances said of Arabella, who was applying to study French and Arabic at Oxford and other Russell Group universities. Frances described how she researched and compiled the list of universities and courses to which Arabella then applied. She researched which universities offered a combination of French and Arabic, and she read reviews about 'what people say about them'. Frances noted that Arabella sometimes 'gets frustrated, she says, you pick out everything in my life, so I have to do something...and then the next thing, she says, Mummy, what should I do?' She described 'conflicting' messages from her daughter about how much support was acceptable.

Frances was also quick to criticise the school's university applications provision. In the summer term of the Lower Sixth year she was frustrated that parents had not been given 'more information about the process'. It is important to note that neither Frances nor her husband had attended university in the UK, although they had been resident in the UK for many years, so the system was less familiar to them than for other parents.

Frances noted that 'two or three' meetings had been held for parents on the process, but that 'they were never one-on-one, so I would have liked a one-on-one'. Frances desired earlier, more bespoke parental engagement. In its absence she was quick to voice her displeasure. 'I'm not really that impressed as of now', but she acknowledged that 'I think the girls are having more [information from the school] than what we [the parents] are having'. However, she desired more direct communications with parents, and unlike Alice, did not share the same desires about intentionally fostering her daughter's independence.

Frances was also comfortable intervening herself with teachers and the school administration to address academic challenges Arabella faced, a practice noted in other accounts of affluent parenting (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011; Weis et al., 2014). For both her GCSE and A Level subjects, Arabella had wanted to drop and change some subjects after the start of the academic year. Frances, not Arabella, was the one

who facilitated this. Frances described how ‘when I thought there was a problem with anything, I would write to the [form and subject] tutors and get help’. She noted that for Arabella to be able to change her A Levels subjects (and GCSE subjects), ‘I had to write to many people [at the school] to make that happen’.

Frances was a confident decision-maker and direct communicator, an orientation she had likely honed in her experience as an entrepreneur and business owner. She described weighing in directly on decisions her daughter had to make and did not hesitate to give advice and directives about what to do, which her daughter complied with. Frances related the following account of Arabella’s first weeks of A Level lessons, and the decision to drop her Maths and Physics A Levels and take History and Geography instead. Arabella had already decided to drop Physics because she perceived the level of work would be too high for her. Frances urged to her to drop Maths as well:

She started with maths, physics, French and English. Because she was good at maths and physics, but then when the first maths homework came home, I sat with her, because my maths is good, I could do maths...and she was so slow. And I said, this is not going to work. It's just, I'm not doing this for two years, it's going to be agony. And I can't do it, so I said to her, look, I hate to break this to you, but I don't think this is going to work...

Although Frances assumed that some level of parental help with homework would be appropriate, evidenced by the fact that she sat with Arabella and worked through her first A Level homework assignment together, she did not hesitate to set a clear limit on how much help she was willing to provide. Instead of pushing Arabella to struggle through Maths, and perhaps hiring an external tutor, Frances adopted a lens of shrewd pragmatism instead, and urged her to drop the subject.

Although Frances did not deem that it would be worth it for Arabella to struggle through Maths and Physics, particularly when she wanted to study languages at university, she did not hesitate to pay for external tuition in languages later in the process. Arabella received private tuition in French grammar and oral practice. She also received extra preparation for Oxford’s language entrance examination. In addition, the family paid for her to do the extra Oxbridge interview practice workshop conducted by a private company advertised through the school.

Frances attended open days with her daughter and was not conflicted about this. She was closely monitoring her daughter's choices, and she viewed this as part of the process. Other parents who attended open days with their daughters attended for similar reasons, and some voiced concerns about wanting to get everything 'right'. Another mother, Daphne, whose daughter Amelia was applying to study Maths at Oxford and other Russell Group universities put this best: 'You want to make sure that your child is in the right place, that it's the right sort of set up, and it's the right course. And make sure that you daughter makes the right choice, not that you start off down on path for one year, and then actually find that, you know…' Parents worked hard to try to orchestrate the 'right' path for their daughters and avoid perceived wrong turns.

The unfairness of work experience

The ability to secure relevant work experience for their children was another key area of difference amongst parents. For instance, Lisa was able to draw on her social networks, which included doctors, to help Cora secure relevant work experience in the field. Cora described this work experience as pivotal to shaping her desire to pursue a career in medicine. She was also able to draw on the experience heavily in her personal statement.

All Trinity parent participants were aware of the importance of relevant work experience in helping students to explore and develop their academic and career interests, and later in shaping their candidacy for particular university courses, particularly in pre-professional fields such as Medicine or Law. However, even amongst affluent White parents, there were differences in their ability to secure relevant placements for their children, based on the nature of their social networks. For example, some families were well-connected in finance circles, but not in other industries. In this way there were disparities in parents' capacities to enact 'concerted cultivation' work in the particular areas in which their daughters were interested.

Many parents voiced that they wished the school would do more to help secure relevant placements for students. Maria, the mother of Clara, applying to study Anthropology said 'the school offers no help…so you end up talking to your friends, and trying to find a compromise between the interests of the student, and what's

available to you'. She found a placement for her daughter in an art gallery, but it was not a specific fit for Clara's interests.

Samantha, who was applying to study Medicine, struggled to find work experience. Both of her parents were teachers. She explained that she 'had no contacts whatsoever to do with any doctors or anything'. She searched for placements online, and found a competitive placement for sixth formers for which she needed to write an essay and submit to an interview. She did get the place, but other students with contacts were able to move easily into positions without an open competition or screening process. Samantha drew comparisons between herself and peers from the school, stating that 'all my friends seem to have all these amazing contacts'.

Challenges in parent-child relationships and obstacles to carrying out 'concerted cultivation' work

Challenges and breakdowns in communication between parents and children impeded parents' abilities to monitor their children's institutional lives at school, and to thereby anticipate and identify problems, and intervene to address them, an important facet of 'concerted cultivation' work. In the sixth form, Trinity School limited direct communication between school and parents, in order to encourage students' independence and sense of responsibility for themselves. However, the school circulated a weekly email newsletter to parents, and there are termly parents' evenings on topics related to applying to university. A copy of the talks that teachers and administrators gave at these evenings was made available on the school's online parent portal, for parents to access later for reference, or in the event that they were unable to attend.

As a result of the limited direct communication between parents and school around university applications, the openness of parents and daughters' relationships and their own communication was important as a means for parents to keep abreast of developments about the process. The experience of a father, Ian, and his daughter, Samantha, illustrates how challenges and breakdowns in this relationship impeded Ian's abilities to anticipate and solve problems for his daughter in the university applications process.

Ian was the head of a sixth form college and his wife was a teacher. Ian was the primary parent who was in dialogue with Samantha's university applications process. Samantha was applying to study Neuroscience at university. She 'loved'

sciences, but she was struggling in her A Level science courses. When her teachers issued their predicted grades for her, the grades were not high enough to make her a viable candidate for Russell Group universities. Samantha had performed poorly in her mock exams, and in other tests in her subjects. However, she had not communicated this to her parents. The school had communicated the issues directly to Samantha, but not to her parents. As a result, Ian was taken by surprise when Samantha conveyed the news, in tears, that her predicted grades were too low to qualify for Russell Group universities.

Ian contrasted the reporting mechanism at Trinity with that of his own private sixth form college, which he described as 'very brass tacks exam oriented'. He said of his daughter, 'Samantha will come home with a report, and if we see them that's just a matter of chance, you know, so we're just not in the loop at all'. He noted that Trinity has 'got the aura of a traditional British public school which is, you know, very much keep parents outside the gate, you know, it's don't call us, we'll call you. And I don't like it'. He resented that the school did not communicate directly with him that Samantha was 'underperforming'. Whereas, at his school 'we put our reports online, we put our attendance online, the exam grades online, everything is there, our homework grades are online, so anybody who wants to know how their kid is doing, can just look it up'.

This approach facilitated parents' ease of access to information about their children's progress, but could undermine the ability of pupil and school to resolve issues without parents and develop students' own agency and independence. However, in situations where the student did not do this for themselves, there was a risk that parents would not be actively brought into the conversation until serious problems had manifested, as in the case of Samantha.

Ian described his communication struggles with his daughter:

I said, "Have you done any tests recently?" "Oh yes, I've left them at school". Then, "Oh, have you brought these?" "No, I forgot". Then, the third time, and then you give up, because all you're going to do is create a fuss, and tension, and conflict, and you know where it's going.

Ian sensed that his efforts to monitor his daughter's academic progress risked jeopardising his relationship with her. He wished that instead the school would report

her performance on tests to him directly, such as through an online portal, so that he did not have to work to solicit the information.

In the absence of his intervention, he lamented that the school was 'perhaps too gentle, I think they probably don't want to get confrontational, and they should, just say, look, this is not good enough. Why don't they say that? And, they don't, as far as I can see'. He insisted that his daughter needed 'a wake-up call, because if she doesn't, sort of, get onto some serious work soon, then she's going to fall flat on her face. And, she needs that wake-up call, she needs to know'. He saw it as the school's responsibility to assess the situation and provide this.

Both Samantha's academic hurdles, and her father's information-gathering were improved when Ian decided to hire a Chemistry tutor to help her raise her performance. The school's Deputy Head agreed to raise Samantha's predicted grades on the condition that she was to begin working with a tutor. Ian pointed to a wider 'boom in private tutors that we've seen over the past ten years' and he viewed this as an unwelcome but necessary reality. He said, speaking of himself and other parents of students in 'private education':

Schools are limited, there's a limited amount of individual attention. They can see, as I can see, whether my daughter's succeeding to her potential or not, and they know that they can just ignore it or, as say, well, I'm paying for private education, therefore they can take care of this.

Some of the cases, most of the cases, perhaps that's true, a lot of the cases it isn't. So, you know, they might be unhappy about it, but they will just stump up and do it, like I'm doing. What else are you going to do? You've just got to do something.

Although private schools tout small class sizes and claim to offer highly personalised attention, parents such as Ian viewed contracting with a tutor as necessary to secure a greater level of 'individual attention' that he perceived Samantha required. While some parents agonised over whether to hire a tutor, others viewed it as part of a necessary financial supplement to private education.

The external tutor then became a useful communication bridge between student and parent, reporting to Ian about Samantha's ongoing performance. Ian conveyed that the tutor 'just told me that she did really badly in this chemistry test

that was quite recent', and that otherwise he 'would never have known that'. In this way, external tutors performed an important role in carrying out 'concerted cultivation' work by both helping parents to monitor their students' academic progress, and by directly intervening to fortify students' performance in certain subjects.

Overcoming parent-child communication issues by being networked with other parents

Other parents noted the challenges of being parents to teenagers who 'sometimes just don't want you involved in their lives', as Daphne, the mother of Amelia articulated. Frances, the mother of Arabella, discussed her former role as a Parents Association year group representative for her daughter's year. She was responsible for organising monthly coffee mornings for parents 'so that we could exchange, really, stories, information'. She explained the role this played to supplement conversations she had with her daughter about school, as 'you always need other people to confirm or otherwise whatever you heard from your daughter'.

Daphne added, referring to when her daughter closed or limited lines of communication with her, 'If you can't hear from them [her daughter], then by going to the coffee mornings, you meet other parents, you hear about this, and that happening, and this, and that… She voiced feeling 'a sense of responsibility, that you do still want to be involved and know what's going on', despite the challenges of parent-teenager dynamics. She contrasted this view with that of other parents she knew, stating 'Because, you know, we're definitely not the sort that, she goes to private school, just so she can be off our hands, and someone else can educate her, we want to be involved in that process'.

Outsourcing support: the role of private tutors

Most families I interviewed had engaged the services of private tuition in some form during the student's sixth form years. When students experienced academic challenges or if students or parents deemed there to be gaps in the school's provision, parents usually paid for these specialist services rather than lobby the student's teacher for extra help, or try to assist themselves. Some of these private tutors that families employed were professional tutors, others were current university

students, and some were current teachers at other independent schools. The head of a leading London tutoring agency reported that teachers from the most prestigious independent schools could charge £100 an hour for tutoring, although they could not tutor their own students.

In this way, tutors performed an important role in enacting 'concerted cultivation' work. Studies that have emphasised parents' direct intervention in strengthening their children's candidacy in the university admissions process have been situated within the context of US university admissions (Lareau, 2011; Weis et al., 2014), which has a markedly different orientation from the UK university admissions process. These systems shape the possible contours of parental intervention in the process. It is important to recognise that the A Level system requires a higher degree of subject specialisation than some other sixth form curricula around the world, notably the US liberal arts curriculum. Further, students typically applied to study one specialised subject at university, and the creation of their personal statement and preparation for admissions interviews and tests required by some universities (Oxford and Cambridge in particular), reflected this honed focus. This explains in part why these parents turned to subject-specific tutors and were less likely to try to help students themselves, compared to studies of their US counterparts at independent schools (Weis et al., 2014). For example, US university applications essays are more general in nature, and encompass topics such as a student's identity, values, character, and leadership skills. The essays are evaluated by university admissions professionals, who are not academics. UK applicants' personal statements, however, are assessed by academics in the student's proposed field of study, and are expected to demonstrate the student's aptitude in the subject and their interest in the field.

As a result of these different admissions processes and criteria, a greater level of subject-specific academic knowledge is required to help students negotiate university admissions in the UK. Therefore it follows that parents of students at Trinity School relied on subject-specific teachers at the school and in some cases specialist private tutors to support students, rather than intervene directly themselves to enhance provision. Unlike most parents, teachers at the school and private tutors had course-specific knowledge that students required to be successful applicants.

The findings resonate with those of Chiang's (2018) study of parents in the context of the Chinese exam-based university admissions system, where parents

mostly ceded control of the process to the school. There are clear similarities between the Chinese and UK educational systems, where university admissions are largely determined by performance in subject-specific examinations, in contrast to American university admissions which heavily weigh extra-curricular activities, leadership skills, and other factors wherein familial intervention in preparation can be advantageous (Weis et al., 2014). An exam-based admissions context would seem to naturally put more emphasis on school-based preparation. Like the parents in Chiang's (2018) study, although most Trinity parents did not 'micromanage' the process and entrusted it largely to the school, most did intervene when their children experienced academic setbacks, such as poor performance or predicted grades outside the range of what is acceptable for elite university admissions.

Students doing it for themselves: carrying out 'concerted cultivation' work of their own

Students enacted 'concerted cultivation' work for themselves, as they worked to overcome challenges in the university applications process. Students negotiated power structures both inside and outside of the school for themselves without direct parental intervention, but often with guidance and possible reinforcement behind the scenes from parents. However, students' varying levels of confidence and self-belief shaped the efficacy of their attempts to meet their desired aims within the school context.

Some students showed a strong emergent sense of entitlement, in terms of advocating for their own needs and agendas within the school's institutional power structure. Students learned this from parents, who in some cases coached them behind the scenes on how to navigate certain situations. Amelia described how she had been admitted to a Headstart taster course in computer science, a week-long residential course based at a Russell Group university. The course was prestigious and places were competitive. However, after she was admitted, Amelia's interests had changed and she was no longer interested in applying to study computer science at university, but favoured engineering instead.

Initially Amelia felt stuck with her earlier choice and perceived that she would not be able to do a Headstart course in her desired area. She told her mother, 'The competition is so big, school will kill me if I turn it down, because it's viewed as a prestigious thing for the school that I've got it'. Her mother coached her saying, 'You

just need to talk to them' at Headstart. She suggested, 'How about you reply back to Headstart and say, you're very flattered, you know, but actually your interests have changed, and you're now moving more towards the engineering bent, rather than the computer science, and would they possibly have an opening'. Amelia did this, and received a positive response. Her mother related that 'they came back to her and said, well, yes, absolutely, we'd love to, really strong CV, we'd love to place you, here are some various options, choose which one you want'. As a result, Amelia was able to complete her preferred Headstart course and gain valuable insight about whether she wanted to study engineering at university. She was able to adjust her placement according to her desires, and further, did not have to turn down the place, or disappoint teachers and senior staff at her school as a result. In this way, and through her mother's coaching, Amelia learned how to enact 'concerted cultivation' for herself, with a view that organisations were malleable and could be successfully navigated, and that no verdict was immutable.

Students practised navigating power structures within the school as well, and learned how to present their case to authority figures to advance their own agendas. Although not analysed in relation to the university admissions process, these findings resonate with those of Calarco (2018) who analysed how middle-class students 'negotiated advantages' in everyday classroom interactions, and Taylor (2021) who analysed how students at elite schools navigated hierarchies in the student-teacher relationship.

In the context of university admissions, this was particularly in evidence when students received their predicted grades from teachers. In every instance where a student was not happy with her predictions, because they were not high enough to apply to the universities and courses which they were targeting, the students petitioned the teachers in question, and in some cases elevated the issue to the school's Deputy Head. In most cases, students negotiated themselves, but in more difficult cases, parents stepped in to intervene. In all cases, parents monitored the issue, and in many instances they coached students in the background, even if the student was the one who was directly interfacing with the school.

For some students, the negotiation process was smooth and seamless. Arabella, a particularly confident young woman, explained that is was 'an easy process for me'. She recounted how she was originally predicted A, A, B in her A Level subjects and 'I needed A, A, A, to be able to apply to Oxford, well, to be able to

be considered. And, I literally just went to my history teacher and I said, please, can you raise it to an A, and she said, yes, and that was it'. Arabella knew the contours of the admissions landscape well enough to be certain that without three predicted A grades she would not be a viable candidate for Oxford. She then confidently deployed this knowledge and was able to convince her teachers to give her the benefit of the doubt and tweak the marks. Arabella's parents were not involved in the process of changing her predicted grades, as she was able to execute it smoothly.

Amelia also successfully raised her predicted grades, and deployed logical reasoning to make her case (Lareau, 2011). She drew on arguments about fairness to the whole class, and standardisation with other subjects. Her mother Daphne related the scenario from her perspective, in which she did not intervene directly but was abreast of all the details of the situation, and was poised to do so if Amelia met significant resistance. Amelia was predicted an A in Chemistry, and 'she really felt she was A* standard', Daphne explained:

But, Chemistry decided they were basing it on the summer exam, and the summer exam was…because Chemistry is one of the modified subjects, they hadn't had previous papers yet. So, the summer exam happened to be the one sample paper that was up on the internet, and Amelia, and a few of her friends, didn't even look at that, they just revised the subject. And then, when it came to the exam, they obviously hadn't done the sample paper on the internet, so she feels the results were skewed, that those who were actually not that strong in Chemistry, but who happened to do the paper, got very high marks. But, those who are actually reasonably strong, didn't get as high marks as expected, because they didn't look at the paper in advance.

Daphne knew the contours of the situation in detail, and explained that 'I wanted to talk to the Chemistry teachers about it, but she [Amelia] didn't let me, so I didn't'. Amelia negotiated a change in the predicted grades herself with her teachers, but knew that her mother was ready to intervene if needed. Amelia made her case drawing on arguments about fairness, pointing to the fact that the teacher was only looking at that one paper, rather than looking at her performance over the year. She also cited the fact that in other subjects, students' performance over the entire year was factored in to the predicted grades.

In more difficult cases, such as that of Samantha who was consistently underperforming, as outlined earlier in this chapter, parents needed to intervene directly. Samantha's initial self-directed attempt to convince teachers to raise her grades was unsuccessful. It was only after both her father and the Deputy Head were involved, and that her father pledged that she would receive intensive private tutoring, that her teachers agreed to raise her predictions.

Particularly confident students such as Arabella displayed a strong sense of entitlement, and were able to successfully navigate power structures within the school in other situations as well. Other accounts, however, have depicted these dispositions as relatively ubiquitous amongst affluent students (Calarco, 2018; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Lareau, 2011). Arabella, who was applying to study Arabic and French at Oxford admitted that 'I'm not very good at sticking to deadlines, in all honesty'. She recounts her experience of submitting the required written work to Brasenose College, Oxford. Normally Oxford required an essay set and marked by a teacher, which was not submitted as part of a student's A Level coursework:

I remember sending in the written work stressed, and on the deadline. I didn't realise I had to also send in an English piece of written work, so the lady from Brasenose replied, thanks so much for your French piece, but you still need to send an English one, you know that, right? And, I was like, yes, but I didn't know that.

So, I had to find the closest possible thing that I could, which was this coursework piece that was in my locker, and I had to scan it, and send it, it was so stressful. Oh, my God. I was missing a lesson to do this, I was running around school, and then I sent it. I had to literally beg my English teacher, because the teacher had to sign it, and I was, like, Mr A, please sign this for me now. He was, like, I can't, it's coursework, you can't send coursework, I said, Mr A, please. He hadn't written…the marks on the sheet were my writing, I'd annotated it, and he was, like, I can't authorise this. I was, like, Mr A, please, I'm begging you. And, he was, like, alright. So, he did it, and he wrote on the thing, not my annotations, so he clarified.

Yes, I was, like, do whatever you want, just please sign it. Then, I just sent it off [to Brasenose], and I was, like, sorry I'm late, please excuse the tardiness. From that day I was, like, okay, there's no way I'm hearing back from them at all, and then I did.

Arabella attempted and succeeded in skirting the rules, as she was able to negotiate an exception from her teacher to sign the coursework submission that she then marked and annotated herself, at the very last minute. She included an apology for 'the tardiness' of the submission to the administrator at Brasenose, and was ultimately still invited to interview later.

The politics of Oxbridge college 'choice'

Students also worked to advance their individual agendas amongst their peers at the school, within a competitive cohort of Oxbridge applicants. Like many UK independent schools, Trinity School had an established policy wherein students were told not to apply to study the same or a similar subject at the same Oxbridge college as another Trinity student in their year. The idea was to maximise all Trinity student's chances of admissions to the two universities, by ensuring that they were not in direct competition with each other in the admissions process. This is a practice found in other educational systems as well, for example, Khan (2011) analysed how this process is worked out in elite schools in the US.

While different independent schools navigate this allocation in various ways, at Trinity students were asked to email the Oxbridge coordinators with their preferred Oxbridge college. The coordinators then emailed students to inform them of overlaps, and to encourage them to resolve the issue amongst themselves. This led to internal competition within the school and amongst peers regarding who would be able to apply to her first choice college.

Students resented their freedom to choose their college being curtailed for the sake of the school's Oxbridge admissions numbers. There was a strong sense of entitlement evident in how the students conceptualised their right to apply to certain Oxbridge colleges that were considered more desirable than others. Students had a sense of a relative hierarchy of the colleges, and felt entitled to the top tier of this hierarchy. The criteria that formed this top tier included that the colleges were 'central' and in the heart of action in Oxford, that their histories and aesthetics were sufficiently 'old', and that they were traditionally 'beautiful' colleges.

Students also widely resented the need to work out which students would apply to which colleges amongst themselves. There was an expectation that staff at

the school should direct this and ensure that all went smoothly. The six members of the school's Head Girl team lamented that 'the school didn't handle it well'. Arabella described the dilemma that two of her friends faced, as they both wanted to apply to study the same subject at Exeter College, Oxford. They petitioned the Oxbridge coordinator to intercede as an independent arbiter, but Arabella described him as 'unhelpful':

Friends of mine, these two really good friends, they went to them [the Oxbridge coordinators] and said, look, we don't know what to do, we both really like, I think it was Exeter, and they're both really, really intelligent, with a huge chance to get in. They were literally directly competing, and the Oxbridge coordinator was, like, sorry, sort it out yourselves, it's not our business, you do it. He was really unhelpful, there were so many ways that I could have thought of sorting it out, like, he could have seen who sent the email first, that was the fairest thing. Or, he could have just spoken to them individually, whoever made the more compelling case. Because, they both had legitimate reasons, as to why they wanted Exeter.

Students were used to the school carefully orchestrating most aspects of the university applications process, so in this case, when teachers recused themselves from allocating colleges amongst students, students were surprised to be left to negotiate amongst themselves to get their individual needs met. Students were more accustomed to negotiating within institutional hierarchies, rather than laterally amongst their peers.

Students frequently voiced concerns about 'fairness', as they longed for a seemingly objective, external decision to be made. The alternative, they knew, highlighted what I term 'affective inequality', where students' abilities to advance their individual agendas were shaped by differing and unequal individual levels of confidence, entitlement, and assertiveness. Particularly when students did not know one another well, and were not already friends, the decision regarding which student would apply to a college in question was decided by the psychologically dominant student who was more unwilling to back down. Some students flatly refused to err from their first choice, leaving the student most willing to be agreeable and flexible to find another option.

However, when the disagreements were between friends, students were usually able to come to a kind of agreement, where one of the students felt more inclined to move their application to another college they liked, especially because they were doing so to keep the peace with a friend. Arabella described how she and a 'good friend' both wanted to apply to the same college, but her friend simply said 'Oh, I'll apply to Jesus, I really liked it [as well]', and the situation was smoothly resolved.

In this way, students encountered tensions between the desired ends of the individual and the collective within the elite school context. Students also negotiated laterally within the school, navigating peer relationships in order to meet their needs in the university admissions process. This was evident as students petitioned one another to apply to their choice of Oxbridge college. In this case, not all students were able to navigate towards their university goals unimpeded by other students at the school, as they found classmates were a source of competition and conflict.

The role of confidence in shaping students' abilities to overcome challenges in the university applications process

While some students at Trinity School demonstrated a strong sense of entitlement as well as high levels of confidence, many students in the year group as a whole suffered from a lack of confidence and an intense fear of failure. This shaped their ability to successfully face challenges in their academic journeys and in the university applications process. This stands in contrast to dominant narratives about elite girls schools' production of agentic and assured students (Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014).

Fear of failure, even minor failure, loomed large amongst the year group. There was a sense of precariousness, of tenuously held success, wherein students perceived that they could not afford to put a foot wrong—every interim step in their academic journeys needed to be a success. Mr Williams, the Oxbridge coordinator, related an illustrative episode from his subject teaching. He had recently joined the school, where he had previously taught at Eton. He set out to apply the same teaching methods he used at Eton with his pupils at Trinity. He recalled a language vocabulary test that he set the students, where instead of reproducing the vocabulary words in the infinitive form of the verb, he presented the verbs conjugated in various tenses. The

idea was to ‘force them to do a bit of thinking and manipulating’. However, it ‘completely threw’ the students as they expected ‘an easy regurgitation exercise’.

While both his Trinity and Etonian pupils ‘complained’ about the format of the test and their performance in it, he related that his pupils at Eton shook off the minor failure more easily and readily, and did not move complaints up within the school’s hierarchy. At Trinity, he made ‘quite a few of the sixth form cry’, and was met with ‘resistance and upset and tears and unwillingness’. He described how students complained to the head of department about the format of the test. Here, students simultaneously displayed both a sense of entitlement in navigating the school’s hierarchy to advocate for their perceived right to high marks on a test, as well as a lack of confidence in their abilities to overcome small setbacks.

Mr Williams related how ‘the rigorous testing that I would have used at Eton without anyone batting an eyelid was not favoured here, because any time [the students] do badly in a test [they] worry about it, whereas at Eton most kids would do badly in a test and then brush it off, and they’d do the next one—they might do badly in tests throughout the year but they know they’re going to cram for the exam and they’ll get their A*, so they don’t panic in the same way…’ Trinity students as a cohort, on the other hand, did not have as high levels of confidence in their own abilities to ensure academic success when it mattered for their university applications, that is, at exam time.

In his role as Oxbridge coordinator, Mr Williams noted that, as a whole, Trinity students’ aptitudes to succeed in an Oxbridge interview setting were also affected by this lack of confidence and discomfort with ‘challenge’ and the possibility of getting something wrong:

I think in that instance you’ve just got to be willing to deal with what’s thrown at you and, kind of, have the confidence to say my view is still valid here, or, you know, I’m still going to argue this and show you how. Up to point, and then you have to say, no, you’re right, I’m wrong.

But you can’t buckle at the first sign of challenge because you’re going to be challenged whether your view’s 100% right or 100% wrong. And most of the questions don’t have a right or wrong answer, so you’re going to be in some ways

arguing in a sensible way and in some ways, you know, in error; you've got to be able to deal with that.

He continued, 'some of our girls can be quite timid and one thing I notice about [Etonian] boys is that they're, sort of, often academically fearless at that age, even without any justification, in a way that our girls aren't, they're always afraid of making mistakes even when they're extremely good'. He noticed a difference in the classroom and in Oxbridge preparation sessions 'in terms of their willingness to, kind of, express themselves, engage in argument'. He noted:

Where the Etonians going to interview, they're almost at a disadvantage because they're so confident, our girls are the opposite, they're at a disadvantage because despite having all this privilege, certainly a perceived privilege, they're not presenting that way…And, sure, they're no worse at their subjects, some of them are very, very talented and much better academically than a lot of the kids that I taught at Eton, you know, the best students I've ever taught have been here, without doubt…

And I think you can often … you can be … in a 20 to 30 minute interview you will be affected by the way a student presents because you're thinking can I teach this person, do they get on with me, are they mature, are they on your level?

In a focus group with the school's six person Head Girl Team, I was struck by the anxiety and self-doubt that bubbled up as the students discussed their upcoming Oxbridge interviews. Kenway et al. (2015) noted feelings of insecurity and fear of failure among female elite school pupils, and this was the case for these students when faced with the prospect of this important phase of the university admissions process. It is important to note that these pupils were all academically high-achieving, accomplished in extracurricular pursuits, and regarded as leaders in their school community. What I observed was a striking contrast to the 'positive agentic sel[ves]' (Forbes & Maxwell, 2019, p. 167), imbued with strong senses of 'assured optimism' (Forbes & Lingard, 2015) or 'surety' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014) that dominates the literature on students at elite girls' schools. The students were particularly concerned about how they would manage nerves and occupy themselves during the often days-long interview process at Oxford that typically consists of multiple interviews at

multiple colleges over the course of a week. One student exclaimed, 'I'll just sit in my room for two days crying, reading my personal statement over and over'.

While Etonians benefit from intersecting forms of privilege that include male gender privilege, Trinity students did not possess that form of privilege and the particular kind of confidence that came with it. Further, most Trinity students did not have inherited family wealth or long histories of familial privilege, but had parents who were part of what I term the 'pseudo-meritocratic elite' (as outlined in Chapter 3). This elite benefited from high salaries but experienced a sense of precariousness, as their socio-economic status was tied directly to their positioning and performance in the labour market (Markovits, 2019).

In addition, London day school students lack the opportunities that boarding school students have to develop a sense of independence, made possible by physical distance from their families. Mr Williams observed the different tenors of the boarding environment at Eton compared to the day school environment at Trinity:

What's very evident in the way that Eton approaches it's entire, kind of, educational mandate is that it tries to foster a significant degree of independence in the kids, and they acquire that I think really from the very fact of being in a boarding school and having to fend for themselves. And the expectations on them. I mean when I was at Eton I was a tutor, tutor for year 9 boys, it would be perfectly reasonable for me to take those year 9 boys to dinner in Windsor, or to do something nice with them in the sort of adult occasion. They would be expected as time went on to be able to have dinner with adults they didn't know and make conversation and not be awkward about that. And they had this sort of ease and confidence that, you know, people talk about Old Etonians in public life and how they present but you can see where it comes from, because of the schooling that they've had as well as the other features of their background. Here, I couldn't take my Upper Sixth for a coffee on the last day of their entire school career without filling out a visit form and running it past five people.

Compared to a boarding school, there was a greater level of constraint placed on Trinity students' independence, both by the school itself and by living with their parents and families. There were less opportunities as a result, to foster a sense of

confidence in their own abilities and the concomitant 'ease' (Khan, 2011) that can flow from this knowledge.

Affective inequality and the limits of students' abilities to enact 'concerted cultivation' work

I will offer here detailed examples of two Trinity students who suffered from a lack of confidence and fear of failure. This shaped the ways in which they enacted 'concerted cultivation' work in the school, and the efficacy of their attempts when they faced challenges in the university applications process.

Clara

Clara reported being 'stressed all the time'. She was most worried about her exams, and her upcoming Cambridge interview. She navigated significant weekly coursework demands that she needed to keep up with. She noted that she was assigned a great deal of homework, and because she studied four essay-based subjects at A Level, 'I usually get four or five essays a week'. Clara noted that the stress she felt 'comes from within', not from teachers, parents, or peers. This stands in contrast to accounts that have emphasised elite school students 'effortless' and enjoyable accomplishment (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013b, p. 86), and embodied sense of 'ease' (Khan, 2011).

Stress was normalised for Clara, as she observed of her classmates, 'everyone is so stressed, people walk around, everyone just looks really so stressed out'. However, Clara also struggled with mental health challenges. She also had a learning need that she had struggled to receive a diagnosis for, which made schoolwork more time consuming for her to complete. As a result, she suffered from greater levels of anxiety and self-doubt than some of her classmates, which impeded the efficacy of her attempts to meet her aims within the school context.

Clara was also one of a small number of Trinity students applying to study a university course which was not offered as a school subject. She was applying to study Anthropology at Russell Group universities. Her first choice university was Cambridge, to which she was applying for a combined course, Human Social and Political Sciences (HSPS), which included Anthropology.

As outlined in Chapter 5, the school offered dedicated university applications preparation classes, weekly timetabled sessions organised by university subject area to which students were to apply. Sessions were designed to encourage students' outside reading in their subjects, to inform the drafting of their personal statements, to prepare them to tackle questions at interview in their subject, and to practice any required additional testing. In subjects that students studied in school, these sessions were conducted by a teacher in the relevant subject area. For other subjects, however, non-subject specialist teachers stepped in to offer provision, and there were less in-school resources available to assist students in preparing to study these subjects.

After attempting practice tests, Clara was not performing well in the HSPS entry exam for Cambridge. In addition, changeover at the school meant that the teacher with whom she had been paired as her personal statement advisor left the school in the summer between her Lower Sixth and Upper Sixth years, and she found that she struggled to establish a comfortable rapport with her new advisor. Clara related that she felt intimidated by this teacher, who is 'quite harsh when I get things wrong, so I'm a bit put off'. Clara's mother Maria related that the teacher was known as being very 'tough' and 'straightforward'.

Clara described a scenario where she avoided asking for help or clarification from her advisor. Her own self-doubt and her fear of this teacher meant that she did not enact 'concerted cultivation' work, in terms of negotiation with adult authority figures in the school. She related that the school's library provided reading lists for different university subjects, and had dedicated sections of the library that applicants could consult in their area. However, Clara did not know that this existed for Anthropology until shortly before her personal statement was due. She explained that there was confusion in the changeover between her two personal statement advisors:

Maybe I didn't listen, or maybe they hadn't told me enough; I don't know which one it is…Because I tend to switch off quite a lot. But my personal statement adviser never told me about any of them [the reading lists]. And she had sent me [sample] topics for interview, and she was like, I e-mailed, do you like the topics, or like the reading list? And I hadn't got an e-mail, but I didn't want to say it, because I didn't want to be like, just, sorry, I haven't got an e-mail. I just laughed [at it and said] OK. I'd done so much reading already on my own, and I know what I have to [read] on my own, so I was OK about it. But she was expecting me to know a lot of stuff, and I hadn't

received things…

It was significant that Clara first doubts herself and questions her own culpability for the lack of information about the readings lists, rather than the fact that there was a changeover between her two advisors. She was aware that her learning need meant that she tended to 'switch off quite a lot', and so she feared that perhaps she failed to hear the message. Clara shows low levels of confidence. As a result, she decides not to follow up and ask her advisor about the email in question, or ask her to re-send it, even though she knows that the email contained valuable information to assist her personal statement drafting and interview preparation. Clara is not able to advocate for her needs within the school context and to secure support when she requires it.

However, seeing she was struggling in her relationship with her personal statement advisor, and given her poor performance on practice tests for the HSPS admissions test for Cambridge, Clara's mother Maria decided to contract with a private tutor. This improved her performance in the test and also helped Clara to draft a personal statement in which she felt confident. In fact, the experience actually then fortified Clara's sense of self-assurance in dealing with her advisor at school.

Clara included a line in her personal statement that referenced characters from a popular television show, and linked them to an anthropological concept. She thought that the reference was 'original', and felt strongly that this helped show that she was 'always thinking about' anthropological concepts in daily life, not only when reading specialist texts: 'You know, I'm not just thinking about an exam [at the end]; if I see something, I'll connect it'.

Her advisor wanted her to delete the reference before she would sign off and approve Clara's statement for submission, and Clara stood firm. Her confidence in this was bolstered by the behind-the-scenes support of her tutor who also really liked the section in question and urged her to keep it in. Clara related to her advisor, 'I'm really sorry, with all due respect, of course I respect your opinions, but it is my personal statement, and I want this in, and I don't care that I'm keeping this in, I really like it'. The advisor ultimately relented and Clara submitted a statement she was proud of. When faced with a disagreement with her advisor, and some uncertainty over what was the right course of action, having an external, third opinion helped bolster Clara's confidence in the decision.

Clara's mother Maria added that it was important for Clara's advisor to not

only be ‘competent in what he or she is doing, but also know the person’ [her daughter]. ‘You can have a set of rules, but then the rules have to be tailored to Clara, and that’s where the process failed’. In contrast, she said that the tutor ‘understood the role, the task at hand better, which wasn’t to say, this is what you should do, it’s just find a way of, sort of, transposing the rules on to who Clara was as a person’. Maria believed that the process of drafting the personal statement should be a highly personal, customised process, which was not dictated by uniform ‘rules’, an example of ‘concerted cultivation’ strategies at work. Clara’s relationship with the tutor helped her to enact this.

Samantha

Samantha, who was applying to study Neuroscience at university, struggled academically in her A Level subjects. She also suffered from fear of failure, which rather than spur her on to work diligently and seek extra help from teachers, caused her to experience a kind of psychological paralysis. She described ‘procrastinating’ and avoiding working. She noted how although she liked making methodical revision notes, she would avoid attempting practice questions in revision, as she so hated ‘to get it wrong’. She acknowledged that she was trying to ‘overcome that a bit more’ after receiving poor mock exam results ‘because I realise I need to get [questions] wrong to learn’.

Unlike other Trinity students, Samantha did not take up the task of managing her own academic trajectory to secure elite university admissions. As outlined earlier in this chapter, it was only when Samantha received predicted grades that would not permit her to be a viable candidate for Russell Group universities that she engaged in ‘concerted cultivation’ work, where she involved her father in negotiations with senior staff at the school to raise her predicted grades, on the condition that she work with a private tutor. Samantha did not address smaller challenges in the university applications process as they arose, such as poor performance on a test or mock exam—instead she waited until the problems had become almost intractable and very difficult to resolve. Unlike other Trinity students, she did not constantly recalibrate to stay on a path towards successful academic outcomes.

However, it was significant that working with a private tutor enabled Samantha to do this kind of work when she was not able to do it on her own. With the tutor, she revised questions she had got wrong on tests and persisted until she could

effectively solve them. She was able to address her fear of failure, as she could tackle challenging problems with support.

Jane, private tutor

Jane, who founded and headed one of the most in-demand private tutoring services in London and worked with many A Level students, where her clients included students at Trinity and some of the most academically selective independent schools in London, described how the most common reason that families wanted to engage her services was 'confidence issues'. She related that some parents 'feel their child has been written off by the school as not capable enough', but they lacked confidence and she said simply 'need some extra support'. In contrast to the image of the confident, 'entitled' student deftly advocating for their needs (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011), Jane noted that many students were not comfortable seeking extra help from their teachers and were 'embarrassed'. In this way, they failed to enact 'concerted cultivation' work. However if their families could fund tutors, these tutors stepped in to provide such assistance without the need to negotiate help within the institution of the school, and without needing to possess the confidence to do so.

Jane and her team of tutors worked to bolster students' confidence by building strong 'rapport' and getting to know them individually, tackling problem areas together, and offering plenty of 'praise and encouragement'. Jane described her ultimate goal as to help students to experience 'the pleasure of figuring something out'. In this way, students could also begin to address fear of failure, as they gained experience with tackling carefully managed and supported challenges alongside the tutor. The tutors that Trinity students engaged not only fortified students intellectually, but also psychologically, and played an important role in addressing affective inequality among students. However, it was significant that students whose families could not easily afford or justify these services were not able to benefit from them.

Discussion

I have shown here how students, parents, and private tutors, worked 'in concert' with the school to negotiate university admissions. A complex picture of variation amongst students and parents was evident, and areas of harmony, as well as

dissonance and tensions, among these multiple actors was clear. To some extent, these actors worked synergistically to navigate university admissions. Parents' 'concerted cultivation' work had many facets and included monitoring major academic decisions, and intervening within the school's power structure in some situations to secure accommodations for their children (Chiang, 2018; Lareau, 2011; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014). Students' 'concerted cultivation' of their own educational trajectories included navigating hierarchies inside (Calarco, 2018; Taylor, 2021) and outside of school, as well as peer relationships, in order to meet their needs in the university admissions process. In turn, the school proved to be a malleable institution when students and parents petitioned for accommodations to be made. This was particularly significant regarding raising predicted grades to levels considered acceptable for elite university entrance, thus facilitating pupils' and families' agendas of achievement. Families also employed private tutors, who played an important role in enacting 'concerted cultivation' work. They not only supplemented the school's academic provision (Chiang, 2018), but also performed important socio-emotional work, helping circumvent tense parent-child relationships, and shoring up students' confidence to remedy affective inequality amongst students.

Dissonance between the actions of the school, students, and parents emerged wherein parents' abilities to support their children were shaped by parents' knowledge of how their daughters were progressing in school, and the wider context of the school's university preparation. Because the school limited direct communication with parents, parents' access to this knowledge was directly influenced by their relationships with their own daughters. This illustrated the complexity not drawn out in other narratives of parental intervention discussed in Chapter 3, which often do not allow room for complicated parent-child relationships fraught with tension (Lareau, 2011; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014). A further area of conflict emerged between students' aims and parental abilities to facilitate them, as I outlined how parents had uneven abilities to secure relevant work experience placements for their children, as they needed to rely on their own social networks in the absence of provision from the school.

Tensions emerged as, on the one hand, parents weighed the desire to mobilise resources available to maximise advantages for their children, peer pressure from other parents to do this, and 'fear of missing out' and disadvantaging their children compared to other elite school peers. On the other hand, they wrestled with ethical

concerns (Perrier, 2013; Sherman, 2017) about how much preparation was 'enough', the value of extra paid services beyond the school's provision, and desires to foster independence in their children. Parents' own biographies and for some, experiences of social mobility, influenced the choices they made about how to act. Of significance is the variation in the degree to which they enacted 'concerted cultivation' work. This marks an important contribution to literature that, with few exceptions (Chiang, 2018; Van Zanten, 2015), has tended to present an intensive level of 'concerted cultivation' as nearly ubiquitous amongst affluent parents (Lareau, 2011; Lareau & Weininger, 2008; Weis et al., 2014; Wheeler, 2018). Further, where variation amongst affluent parents has been identified, there has been little exploration of parents' own biographies, which I have showed here powerfully shaped their perspectives on the kind of work they deemed appropriate and ethical to enact.

Further, the findings highlighted the spectrum of affective inequality at the school, wherein students varied in their levels of confidence, which in turn shaped their abilities to navigate rules and hierarchies in the school to meet their needs. This variation is important to illuminate as students' abilities to advance their individual agendas within the institutional context of the school was pivotal to either smoothing or complicating their educational trajectories—for example in securing assistance with their applications, negotiating predicted grades, applying to an Oxbridge college of their choice, and other areas. It is notable that although all student participants benefitted from intersecting forms of racial and socio-economic privilege (all were White and affluent), confidence levels were uneven and varied significantly.

Importantly, there is a lack of attention in the extant elite schooling literature to varied dispositions and experiences amongst students at the school who are part of dominant racial and class categories (i.e. White and affluent). These students are presented as a largely homogenous group, who enjoy similar levels of confidence, agency, and senses of entitlement. The elite girls' schooling literature is replete with generalisations about students' 'positive agentic sel[ves]' (Forbes & Maxwell, 2019, p. 167), imbued with strong senses of 'assured optimism' (Forbes & Lingard, 2015) or 'surety' (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014), and carrying out 'effortless' and enjoyable accomplishment Maxwell and Aggleton (2013b). In contrast, the students identified who did not exhibit such high levels of these were from racial and socio-economic groups that were underrepresented in the elite school community, or had a disability (Forbes & Maxwell, 2019; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2013; Khan, 2011).

Instead I found that affluent, White Trinity School students possessed varied affective repertoires, and some were far less 'positive'. These in turn shaped the ways in which they were able to negotiate the university admissions process. In contrast to the image of the confident, entitled student always deftly and easily advocating for their needs (Calarco, 2018; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Lareau, 2011), some Trinity students were unable or unwilling to ask for help or secure accommodations at different junctures in the process. Some pupils were not comfortable seeking extra help from their teachers and were 'embarrassed' (private tutor Jane noted that this was common among her clients). In this way, the students failed to enact 'concerted cultivation' work. For example, Clara described a scenario where she avoided asking for help or clarification from her advisor. Her own self-doubt and her fear of this teacher meant that she did not enact 'concerted cultivation' work, in terms of negotiation with adult authority figures in the school. However, her parents contracted a tutor who then provided assistance, without the need to negotiate help within the institution of the school. Importantly, this work with the tutor actually shored up Clara's confidence and improved her ability to successfully navigate interactions with her teacher when they disagreed about the direction that her personal statement should take. Similarly, work with a private tutor enabled Samantha to do 'concerted cultivation' work that she was not able to do on her own, as she had avoided seeking help from teachers. With the tutor, she revised questions she had got wrong on tests and persisted until she could effectively solve them. She was able to address her fear of failure, as she could tackle challenging problems with support.

Overall, there was variation and differences in the experiences of students and of parents, disrupting ideas about the homogenous experiences of affluent parents (Lareau, 2011) and students (Fahey, 2014; Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019). In this way, this work calls attention to the unevenness of privilege where gender, affect (varying confidence levels), type of elite school attended (day as opposed to boarding), parental biographies (and their experiences of social mobility), parent-child relationships (and the ease of flow of information between them), and parental networks (whether they are well-connected in a students' desired career field or not) work for or against students in particular uneven ways.

In addition, there were important tensions between students and parents' agendas and those of the school, as they negotiated conflicts between the desired ends of the individual and the collective within the elite school context. This was

evidenced through the process of strategic Oxbridge college choice, and most acutely though the negotiation of predicted grades. Although in most cases where predicted grades were challenged by students, they were raised, school administrators were taking a calculated risk. If too many students failed to reach their predicted grades and this was noted by the universities to which they had applied, the credibility and validity of the school's predictions could be called into question in future. In this way, school administrators needed to balance the strategic positioning of current as well as future cohorts of Trinity students. However, it was in each individual student's interest to maximise her predicted grades, in order to have the best chance of receiving offers at the elite universities she desired to attend that particular year (as outlined in Chapter 5).

Chapter 7: The rationales that underpin 'concerted cultivation' work in the university applications process

Introduction

This chapter analyses the rationales that underpinned the 'concerted cultivation' work carried out by the school and by students' parents outlined in the previous chapters. Areas of agreement between the school and many Trinity parents in their respective emphases on academic achievement and their desires to direct students towards elite university destinations are elucidated. The findings show how the school's teachers and administrators saw student identities as entrepreneurial projects to be worked on, and positioned students as ultimately responsible for achieving academic success. Parental biographies and anxieties about economic and social status influenced their emphasis on academic, professional, and economic achievement for their children, and their desires to direct students towards elite university destinations. However tensions among the actors are also presented, and the conflicted experiences of parents are analysed, including affective concerns about their children's wellbeing, and of the possible negative effects of pressure to achieve.

The entrepreneurial self and the primacy of academic achievement

The following section is a vignette from the school's Welcome to the Sixth Form Day. Here the Head of Sixth Form frames the students' sixth form journey as a quest to 'engineer your own success', emphasising the individual self as an entrepreneurial project to be worked on, and positioning students themselves as ultimately responsible for attaining their own 'successful' academic outcomes. This reflects neoliberal discourses regarding the purpose of education (Ball & Olmedo, 2013; Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 52; Stahl, 2014, p. 665). Examples of the school's emphasis on the primacy of academic achievement as the route to 'success' are then analysed.

Welcome to the Sixth Form Day

Trinity School's annual Welcome to the Sixth Form day was an orientation day both for Trinity pupils who had just completed their GCSE exams and would be progressing in to the sixth form that autumn, as well as pupils who had taken their GCSEs at other schools and would be joining Trinity at sixth form. The new students, of which there were about a dozen, were grouped together in the corner of the common room talking nervously to one another. They sized up the common room around them and wondered how they would fit into this new physical and social space. The returning students looked relieved to have finished their GCSE examinations and happy to re-connect with friends again after the school's examination leave. However, they would have to wait several more weeks to find out their results, which they knew would sit irrevocably on their academic record when they applied to universities. Some were apprehensive about the A Level subjects they had chosen to study. Nervousness and uncertainty hung in the air.

I chatted with Michelle and Zoe, two returning students. They told me what A Level subjects they would be studying. Michelle was somewhat unsure of her choices of A Level subjects. She mentioned that she had chosen Ancient History but had been deciding between that course and Classical Civilisation, a similar course but with some key differences. 'Yeah, my dad said I should do Ancient History', Michelle explained. As she was studying this subject for the first time, she was somewhat apprehensive. 'My dad wanted me to do Ancient History *and* History of Art', Zoe chimed in. Even though the students' parents were not physically present in the room, their influence and advice were evident.

The day was held in the school's sixth form centre, the command centre for the operations that would launch these students from Trinity School out into the wider world of university. At the gateway to the sixth form centre were the offices of the key staff who assisted the sixth formers. These included the offices of the Head of Sixth Form, the Sixth Form secretary, and the Higher Education and office. The Higher Education office had a large central table for small group meetings and presentations. The social hub of this wing was the sixth form common room, a space for students to meet and socialise during break times. The room was inviting. Bright and airy, it was composed of floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out on a courtyard of trees and listed buildings, creating the feel of a being inside a well-situated

greenhouse. Colourful and comfortable sofas abounded, inviting students to stay and converse with one another. If the sixth form was a beehive of activity, the common room was the space where students came together to connect, exchange information, and solve problems on their journey through sixth form life. A few current Lower Sixth students (who would move up to Upper Sixth that autumn and would be these new sixth formers' older counterparts) were relaxing and chatting in the room at the start of the school day. These older students would be one of the most valuable resources for their younger counterparts; I remembered from conversations with the current Lower Sixth students about university applications guidance they received from the students who proceeded them. The older girls got up to leave as they saw that the welcome proceedings were about to get underway.

The day began with a presentation from the Head of Sixth Form, Mrs Cleary. She stood at the front of the sixth form common room and pointed to the PowerPoint slide behind her. 'Engineer Your Own Success' heralded the first slide. The bullet points underneath shouted boldly to 'take control,' 'think ahead', and 'get involved'. She emphasised how important it was for students to 'take control' of their academic life. Diligent completion of coursework and success in examinations was assumed, and not even mentioned. When Mrs Cleary spoke about academics, she intoned that students needed to find ways to go beyond the syllabus in their academic subjects, to pursue their intellectual interests outside the classroom: 'It's not just about homework, it's about going beyond', she said 'and thinking outside the box'.

For the most selective universities, Mrs Cleary emphasised, exam success alone was not enough to secure a place. Students needed to be able to prove that they had passionate and sustained intellectual interests, which they had carried beyond the classroom on their own initiative. The summer before students even begin sixth form, they are already told what they need to do to secure entry to these kinds of universities in two years' time.

Some of the 'outside the box' suggestions included marrying travel plans with academic interests. She used interests in history, art history, and biology as examples for how students could combine vacations to different parts of the world with enhancing their academic life. The assumption was that students must be on a constant quest to find opportunities to stretch and distinguish themselves academically, even whilst on holiday. (It was also assumed that students' families would fund enriching travel opportunities, either in the form of school trips with

additional costs not covered by tuition, or as part of family holiday travel. It was implicitly acknowledged that the students were supported by external resources beyond what the school offered.)

As Mrs Cleary continued with her talk, she explained the term 'supra-curricular activities', for the girls who did not already know. These were academic interest clubs that students pursued during lunchtimes or afterschool, which went beyond their learning in the classroom. She urged the students to seek out these opportunities, and listed examples of these clubs, while emphasising that the onus was on students themselves to ensure that they 'get involved'.

Entrepreneurial selves

The emphasis on 'taking control' shifted the locus of responsibility for student success from the school onto the individual student. This message was significant as Mrs Cleary's talk set the tone for the day and was the only time that the students were addressed together as a year group, before breaking into form groups, and later into A Level subject groups. Perhaps because it was taken for granted, but nevertheless, Mrs Cleary did not outline how the school and its staff would support the students in their individual journeys. Instead there was a strong message of personal agency, and ultimately individual responsibility for how one fared.

'It's your future,' continued Mrs Cleary, it's about 'making yourself into the person you want to be.' Students scanned *Welcome to the Sixth Form* booklets that had been given to them, with 'Become the person you want to be…' emblazoned on both the front and inside cover. Students posing triumphantly while on an outdoor expedition smiled energetically back at the new sixth formers.

The move from GCSE-level study to sixth form, broadly speaking and not only at Trinity, is regarded as a significant step towards students being conceptualised as adults. For the first time they have complete autonomy over their choice of subjects to study, and are able to specialise in areas of particular interest to them. The welcome booklet emphasised the students' 'freedom and independence', with a concomitant 'responsibility to direct your own learning and manage your own time'. As the most senior girls in the school, they typically led school extra-curricular clubs and societies. The booklet reminded the students that their sense of responsibility would extend beyond themselves and to others, and that 'you will be the most important role

models for our younger students with various opportunities to show leadership in the school community'. The rhythms of their everyday lives would be altered, as sixth formers no longer wore the school uniform—they were entrusted to wear their own clothes and to dress appropriately. They could also come and go as they pleased from school during free periods. Mrs Cleary was keen to signal to students that along with greater autonomy and freedom, large and small, would come a more pronounced sense of responsibility for oneself.

'The more you put into it the more you get out of sixth form', urged Mrs Cleary. There was an assumption that students would need to expend work, and invest in the sixth form experience, with a view towards the attainment of a certain return on that investment—that is, a better self, 'the person you want to be'. There was a clear emphasis on students' selves as the centre of their sixth form experience. There was also an assumption that these selves were not yet finished, that there was a gulf between who they were and 'the person you want to be'. Therefore the thinking followed that these selves required improvement, and that this would not happen organically or automatically. There was an emphasis on the self as something to be 'made', and so investment and work would be required to reach this new self.

The 'making' of this self had more dimensions than just the intellectual and academic. Mrs Cleary moved on to the 'get involved' bullet point on the slide. She gestured to pictures of students trekking on camels through a Moroccan dessert, and jumping excitedly in the air in Central Park while on an exchange in New York City. These selves were also physically fit and active, energetic, happy, social, and well-travelled around the globe.

'The sixth form is great *fun*', she continued, as evidenced by the action photos on the slide behind her. She then explained the school's leavers' ball and gestured to a group photo of students dressed up for the ball. 'Time goes quickly in the sixth form', she emphasised that before students knew it they too would be at that leavers' ball—'You need to engineer your own success from the beginning'.

Students' expressions ranged from wide-eyed anxiety to vacant exhaustion. They had just resurfaced after a marathon of revision and test-taking. For each girl there was a question mark hanging over what sixth form, which had not yet begun, would look like for her academically and socially. Now, despite a brief glimpse of images of 'fun', they were tasked with a great deal. They were to be the masters of their university fates and captains of their academic souls. In addition, they would

craft well-rounded selves, who would explore foreign countries, be physically fit and active, and have a group of close-knit friends to pose triumphantly with at the leavers' ball. What's more, they were reminded that time was scarce, and the engineering needed to begin now.

Anxiety

After she outlined the importance of supra-curricular activities, Mrs Cleary turned her attention to the students' A Level subjects. The students listened attentively. I thought of my conversation with Michelle and Zoe earlier about their choices of A Level subjects. I knew that uncertainty hung in the air, both for students who were taking new subjects, or had made difficult choices between subjects, and for students who were continuing with subjects from GCSE level but would now be required to work at a more advanced level. Students' knew that their A Level results directly determined the universities to which they would be able to gain entrance.

Mrs Cleary acknowledged the reality that some students would find in the autumn that they want to change their A Level subject choices. She began to explain the procedure that students should follow to make such a change. At that moment a student in the room began to cry loudly and hyperventilate. Her hands were trembling and shaking. Shocked students stared at her in silence as a teacher in the room quickly went to the student to help her up from where she was sitting. The teacher calmly and quickly guided the student out of the room and to the school nurse's office. The students who were left behind whispered to each other in hushed tones: 'She was sick here', one student exclaimed.

Mrs Cleary observed what unfolded, as the teacher guided the student out of the room. The head teacher looked somewhat flustered as she put on a stoic front to continue with the PowerPoint at hand. As she continued to explain the process for changing a student's choice of A Level subject, there was a low din in the room as students whispered with their friends. Mrs Cleary quickly covered the final PowerPoint slide. 'Now, I'm going to call out form groups to go on to the terrace for strawberries and cream', she continued. As she called out the students' names they each stood up in turn to head outside, and the din got louder as they were able to discuss what had just happened in the room.

The prospect of proceeding to stoically eat strawberries and cream on the sunny terrace as if all was well felt noticeably dissonant when following the student's visceral panic attack. The whimsical and celebratory dessert, normally associated with summer garden parties, felt incongruous with the weighty exhortations to 'engineer your own success' and the visible expression of panic. It was clear that there was a lot of work ahead. Uncertainty and anxiety had just spectacularly bubbled up to the surface. It was clear that the sixth form journey would not be one of mere 'effortless' and enjoyable accomplishment, as Maxwell and Aggleton have suggested (2013b, p.86), but rather it was already inflected with insecurity and fear of failure, as Kenway et al. (2015) noted.

The students were allowed this moment to feel the sun on their skin and enjoy eating fruit with sugar and cream. It was a little pleasure that surely was part of the 'fun' of sixth form that Mrs Cleary discussed. It was a space where they could spend time forming new friendships and strengthening existing ones, which would be important supports for the students over the next two years. As the shocked students soldiered outside to proceed with the planned timetable, although noticeably shaken, they had their first opportunity of their sixth form careers to acknowledge the unavoidable anxiety and uncertainty that confronted them, and move resolutely forward step by step.

Points of departure

In sum, the Head of Sixth Form framed the students' sixth form journeys as a quest to 'engineer your own success', emphasising the individual self as an entrepreneurial project to be worked on, and positioning students themselves as ultimately responsible for attaining their own 'successful' academic outcomes. Further, the metaphor of engineering one's own success evoked a process of controlled planning and mapping, authored by each individual. There was little room to explore, linger, or even get lost for a while when one was 'engineering' a path.

Although the rhetoric and images emphasised a range of student achievement—including sporting, creative, and social—academic achievement was mentioned first and discussed at greater length and in more depth than the others. It was clear that this form of achievement was highly valued and was seen as a fundamental expectation of sixth form students at Trinity.

Emphasis on academic achievement, elite university entrance, and elite professional careers

There were other ways in which the school emphasised and assumed academic achievement and entrance to elite universities and professions. Even the material space of the school promoted academic achievement and elite university entrance. Emblazoned on the walls of the school hall were the names of the school's annual 'Queen's Scholar' (a pseudonym) over the years. The honour was given to one student each year for the 'highest academic achievement'. The university at which the student matriculated was listed below her name. Most listed a college at Oxford or Cambridge, others listed other elite universities such as Durham and St Andrews.

A more comprehensive record of former students' university matriculations was retained on the school's website and widely known by current students. Each year, the list included about one dozen students who headed to Oxbridge, with the rest matriculating at elite, mostly Russell Group universities, with very few exceptions. Almost all students went on to study traditional academic subjects, with one or two exceptions headed to art or drama college. Each year, Old Girls came back to talk with current sixth formers about their experiences at different Russell Group universities. There were clear assumptions about the kind of futures that were worthy routes for Trinity students.

However, some parents found themselves at odds with the dominant messages that the school articulated regarding desirable futures. For example, Ian, the father of Samantha, articulated this most clearly when discussing his daughter's desire to apply to study Medicine, and then Neuroscience, despite struggling in her science courses and being at risk of not receiving predicted grades high enough to apply to Russell Group universities. He wished that she had been willing to consider courses such as nursing to which she was more likely to gain entry based on her predicted grades, and to which he argued she was better suited due to her strong interpersonal skills:

I was never convinced that medicine was what she should do. I thought yeah, it's all right. But to be honest with you, completely honest, my mother was a nurse, my mother's mother was a nurse, we've got a very medical family, there's nothing wrong with being a nurse. And I know, you know, if you go to Trinity and say well I want to grow up to be a nurse, I mean you just don't say that. But the reality is I think that's

probably…I've always felt that's where she belongs, you know… So it's a pretty demanding environment and really realistically, you know, you go to Trinity because you want to be a doctor, or a lawyer, or an accountant, you want to be a captain of industry, I meant that's kind of…you know, that's high court judge, you know, you don't go and say well I want to be a nurse, you know. Go somewhere else if you want to be a nurse.

Even though Ian himself wished his daughter would consider nursing, a respectable career path to which he believed she was well-suited and would enjoy, he pointed to the dominant ethos of the school as an obstacle to her consideration of this as a valued academic and career path.

Parental anxieties and the importance of academic and professional achievement

Most parent participants had a strong conceptualisation of society as unequal and socio-economically stratified, with a sense of scarcity of places at the 'top'. This produced a strong sense of precariousness and a drive towards competition, which resonated with studies in other contexts by Markovitz (2019) and Weis et al., (2014). Parents consequently emphasised, in line with the school, the importance of academic achievement as the route to secure entrance to elite universities, which provided access to elite professions that conferred economic and social status within this stratified society.

James, a private equity executive and father of a Trinity student in Year 10, as well as a son in sixth form at an elite London boys' school, was one of the few fathers to participate in the research. However, James' perspective is notable in that he spoke directly to issues of acute economic and class anxiety in relation to his children's futures.

James had attended a grammar school in the Southeast of England and had gone on to attend a Russell Group university in the South of England, which was not Oxford or Cambridge. He highlighted a sense of economic precariousness for this generation of young people, which he had not experienced. James pointed to rising house prices in London that made it difficult for this generation of young people to buy houses without access to 'family money'. He also explained how he perceived the impact of changes in Britain's class system for this generation compared to his

generation which started their careers in the 80s (including more young people going on to university than before), coupled with the internationalisation of London. The underpinning theme of his discussion was a clear, prevailing idea that there was now more competition for elite professional careers in London as a result of London's rise as a European and international financial centre.

Further, although he expressed that he was glad that Britain's previously more 'closed' society had become more open to social mobility (at least in theory if not always in practice) since his generation came of age, he conveyed anxiety about the combination of increased national and international competition for jobs (Brown et al., 2020; Weis et al., 2014), and its implications for this generation of young people. James noted that without a first class degree, or a degree from Oxford or Cambridge, he was able to have his choice of positions with top law firms in the City. He observed that young people applying for entry level positions today would be required to demonstrate a deeper level of interest in the profession in order to distinguish amongst the competition—'to look as though you love law'. Further, due to increased competition for places, they can be expected to complete internships first before they will be considered for what were once standard entry-level positions. He contrasted this with the experience of his generation of university graduates, who found themselves among a smaller cohort that was nearly 'guaranteed a job'.

James expressed concern about his children's future prospects in the labour market, knowing that they would have to work harder and 'do so much more' than he had had to do. This was coupled with a perception that only Oxford and Cambridge would offer a sufficiently challenging and structured university education to ensure students continued to work hard and achieve in this new landscape. He asserted that, 'There's a big deal at the moment, where middle class parents like us believe that universities have gone downhill since we were at university, except for Oxford and Cambridge in Britain.' In particular, he argued that Oxford and Cambridge offered a more challenging education, including more 'contact hours' and 'structure' than other universities, and this would ensure his children would stay on a path to success, culminating in strong job prospects. He noted that if students were Oxbridge bound, 'if anything, the temperature's going up and it's stressful, but the other ones [other universities], they're landing in what looks like a holiday camp. We're very paranoid about that as a generation'. James was deeply anxious that his children, who were on a path of steady achievement bolstered by the structured rhythms of their independent

schools, would then cease to continue to do the hard work required of them to achieve academically at university and secure jobs after graduation. He saw Oxford and Cambridge as guarantees of rigor and challenge that would keep students engaged in the work of achieving.

Some parents articulated that amongst their friends there was an expectation that their children would attend one of a small group of elite universities. Lisa (the mother of Cora), a lawyer whose husband worked in private equity, reflected:

We all talk about the open days. People do talk, are you going for Oxford or not, is one of the things. To be honest, there's a fairly, sort of, you know, because the area which we live, and the schools to which our kids go, there's a, sort of, group of universities to which they all apply. So, it will be the Durhams, the Exeters, the Bristols, Bath, Warwick, there's a group of about ten to fifteen universities, Edinburgh is in there, that they tend to apply. There's only one of my friends, well, as I said, one of my friends, her son has decided not to go to university, another one her son wanted to do motorsports engineering, so he was on a completely different track to us….I think it's the Russell Group, I think people tend to think that they are probably the places to apply to, and they're the places that appeal to our kids…they're fairly predictable.

Lisa noted that there was strong interest amongst parents whose children were applying to Oxbridge as a particularly located elite tier of universities, but that beyond that their children conformed to a 'predictable' range of university places at other elite Russell Group universities. Parents seemed to take for granted that their children would progress into these institutions. Indeed, the 'concerted cultivation' enacted by the school (Chapter 5) as well as parents, private tutors, and students themselves (Chapter 6) ensured that this was generally true. Of course, it is this pattern of well-resourced investment that underpinned these well-worn trajectories from elite school to elite universities, more than it was simply a matter of the 'appeal to our kids'.

Many parents discussed what they described in various terms as the 'London bubble', 'London pressure', or the 'London problem'. Daphne (the mother of Amelia) who was not employed outside the home and whose husband worked in private equity articulated this in the most forthright terms:

I think it's to do with the socioeconomics. The fact that, in order to live here, you need to command a certain salary, which means you've got a certain education, and you're at a certain level professionally. So, inevitably, you are probably pretty well educated, with one, if not two university degrees, I reckon, and in a fairly high pressured job, you know, which obviously, commands a reasonably good income. And, I think, as a result of that, you know, you're very ambitious for your children to do as well as you do, or better, or you feel that your duty as a parent is to provide as well as possible for them as you can.

It is important to note that although fathers in these families were more likely to have a 'high pressured job', although some mothers did or had previously before having children, even mothers who were not employed outside the home emphasised academic and professional achievement for their daughters.

Daphne articulated an 'ambition' but also a 'duty' to ensure that her children could equal or better her own economic and social status. Of course, affluent London parents do not have a monopoly on 'ambition' nor a sense of 'duty' to maximise their children's life chances, but as outlined in the previous chapters, these families have a range of strategic knowledge and resources available to them that make their ambitions seem realistically within reach. Families without the same level of privilege and resources often have fervent ambitions and a strong sense of duty to ensure that their children are able to equal or better their own economic and social status, but in many cases their efforts to do this are impeded by a lack of resources with which to pursue this end (as outlined by Vincent, 2017).

It is important to note that parents described the 'London pressure' as an on-going aspect of raising children within a privileged context in London, which gathered intensity at the point of preparing for entrance examinations required for independent senior school entrance. The London day schools to which families were applying were heavily oversubscribed and highly academically selective. Trinity School's admissions rate was typically around 10%.

Parents connected me with a highly sought after private tutor, Jane, who built her business preparing students for senior school entrance examinations, and due to on-going demand from parents, her team continued to offer tutoring services through A Level, as well as tutoring for specific university entrance examinations. She also offered tutoring for students as young as Year 1. Jane noted that clients wanted to

ensure their children were on a 'determining path' that consisted of a succession of 'blue chip' educational institutions, starting with elite independent preparatory schools, which prepared children to qualify for entrance to elite senior schools. From the parents view, she explained, these senior schools improved students' likelihood of securing a place at Oxford or Cambridge, which then set them up for elite professional careers. Research in this area indeed shows this to be the case (Friedman & Laurison, 2019; Montacute & Cullinane, 2018; Savage, 2015; The Sutton Trust 2019a). She explained that a parent whose seven year-old daughter was accepted into a prestigious preparatory school known to be a feeder for top independent senior schools, stated that her daughter was 'on her way to Oxford'.

It is important to note that Jane herself has three children who attended the most selective London day schools. One went on to Cambridge and now worked for an elite global management consulting firm, and the other two were currently studying at Oxford and another elite Russell Group university, respectively.

Jane illustrated the pressure to put children on this 'determining path' as she related how she gave a talk to an NCT (National Childbirth Trust) class of parents of six-month-old children about independent school educational options in London. She explained that she maintained a three-year waitlist for her services, and parents of children as young as three had approached her about working with her to prepare for senior school entrance examinations.

The value parents ascribed to Oxbridge and elite professional careers

As a route to achieve economic and social status, students' parents valued Oxford and Cambridge universities as superior to others in terms of the economic opportunities they made possible and the social status the degree conferred. The school's Oxbridge coordinator articulated that he perceived many of the parents with which he interacted to have a kind of 'status anxiety' that they thought could be assuaged by an Oxbridge place for their children. Anxieties about the future economic and social status of their children is an important theme in accounts of elites (Markovitz, 2019; Weis et al., 2014). Further, Gill (2013) deploys the term 'status anxiety' to analyse the experiences of a London-based managerial elite. The Oxbridge coordinator reflected:

I think there's a level of expectation. I think it's all that the parents immediately talk about in terms of, you know, universities. And there's a, sort of, status anxiety thing, and, you know, these parents are, you know, obviously it's always unfair to tar them with the same brush but, you know, a lot of them … with wealth goes status anxiety and the desire to have all the trappings of wealth and, kind of, the right things. And in terms of kids it's your private school education and then, of course, the product of that which is the best whatever it is.

And I think people will always search around for ways of distinguishing themselves from others and proving that they are the best, and I think they've latched onto Oxford and Cambridge as a way of proving that they are, or their children are, the best. Not necessarily a well-reasoned approach, not necessarily a fair approach, but I think it's just a new way of saying, you know, this is the pinnacle, especially because private schools have got so good at churning out A at GCSE, and top grades in sixth form.*

Whilst most students from Trinity went on to attend Russell Group universities, far fewer secured places at Oxbridge, typically about a dozen students from a year group of 110. Therefore an Oxbridge place, even in a privileged school context, signalled a special achievement. The coordinator talked about the 'filtering' that Oxbridge does within a pool of highly academic candidates:

What's the next step? Well, we've finally got one thing which takes even very good kids and, sort of, filters them, in a way, so it's a good way of maintaining your, sort of, status, I think.

Parents mapped academic exclusivity onto social and economic exclusivity. 'There's Oxbridge, and then second choices like Edinburgh, Durham. We all know the hierarchy, the snobbery of it', said Alice, the mother of Charlotte, applying to study Medicine at Oxford. Significantly, parents identified a 'snobbery' that reached beyond perceived academic excellence. James, a father, noted: 'So, in Britain, the trouble with this hard line, you've got Oxford and Cambridge, and then the rest—there's a kind of snob factor about those two, academic snobbery, and then the rest is slightly seen as also rans. In the States, you've got lots of brand names, like Princeton,

Harvard, Yale, Stanford…' Although he acknowledged the reputational 'hard line' separating Oxbridge from other Russell Group universities as 'trouble[some]', he did not fundamentally call into question the power of 'brand names' with a particular 'snob factor'. James explained of his own arrival at a Russell Group university which was not Oxford or Cambridge: 'Most of us had tried for [Oxbridge]…didn't get in. So, we all arrived with what we would call a chip on our shoulder, we're not at Oxford…' He was keenly aware of a sense of hierarchy amongst different universities, and its implications for how he conceptualised himself.

Further, as parents imagined their daughters' future horizons in global terms, many articulated that the global salience of Oxford and Cambridge's reputations was a key advantage. 'Everyone in the world has heard of it', tutor Jane stated this most succinctly. Moreover, Daphne observed that Oxford and Cambridge seemed to have a more developed alumni network. She noted that they had a history of gathering alumni together and connecting them after their university years, whereas other Russell Group universities did not do this or had only recently begun to do this with fundraising aims in mind:

Particularly here in the UK, there's that, you know, old school tie, not only where you've been to school, but where you've been to university. And, that, sort of, the alumni, and there is a lot that goes on. I mean, Harry [her husband] was at Cambridge, at St John's, and there are regular events and functions to which he's invited. He, of course, interacts with all sorts of other graduates, who are also, you know, high up in industry, wherever. And, I think that there's that, sort of, network that's created, and I think that is still very strong.

Whilst Daphne acknowledged that her Cambridge-educated husband, Harry, also networked with graduates from a variety of universities who were 'high up in industry', his Cambridge connection provided particular opportunities to connect with other alumni of his Cambridge college and form a social and professional network. It is possible that the collegiate system at Oxford and Cambridge fosters a stronger sense of attachment and intimacy than students would experience as part of a larger university setting. Regardless, it seems that Oxbridge colleges emphasise the development of alumni networks in a way that other Russell Group universities may not.

Parents also articulated explicit economic benefits of an Oxbridge degree, particularly in competitive, high-earning sectors such as finance. Many families that I met with had a parent who worked in the financial sector, and this was indicative of the school's parent body overall. Families needed to earn past a certain income threshold to be able to afford the school fees, with very limited bursaries available, and London's financial sector is home to some of the highest earners in the UK and indeed the world (Savage, 2015).

Alice talked about a 'perceived elite pathway' through Oxbridge. Moving through this pathway was seen as giving one a greater chance of securing desirable jobs. I asked Alice what kinds of jobs these would look like and she replied, 'jobs in the City, that's what people know around here, that's what we're exposed to'. She lamented that that conceptualisation was narrow and 'boring', but she said for many people she knows 'success is quite financially oriented; people want the chichi financially rewarded jobs'. She observed, 'A lot of people are in those jobs themselves, and want their children to go that way. People do what they are exposed to, what they know'. In this way, an Oxbridge credential takes on a particular economic significance in an affluent London context where many parents work in the financial sector.

Maria, the mother of a Clara, applying to study Human, Social, and Political Sciences (HSPS) at Cambridge, had worked in the financial sector in London but was originally from Italy. She acknowledged the 'opportunities a good university gives you, in terms of employment, or just having the name on the CV'. Maria perceived a labour market advantage to an Oxbridge degree that was particularly important as a way to stand out in sectors where there was high competition for jobs and therefore 'tough and ruthless selection', such as finance, and where the sheer ratio of applicants per place may necessitate a preliminary culling of the pool by university attended. She explained:

In places like, I don't know, private equity, right, finance, top banks, if you apply, because they receive so many CVs, the first screening is, what university. If it's Marconi, Oxford, Cambridge, Rizal, then you're in, you've passed the first, all the rest are out, regardless of how clever you are. So, because they do not have any other metric. Then, you have the degree, how many years, your performance, these kinds of things, but the first is university.

She acknowledged, however, that 'for careers that are not in finance I think, at the end of the day, if circumstances bring you to Exeter and not to Oxford, it's okay, you can still have a successful and happy life…of course, the more you progress in your career, the less important university is'. Indeed Maria was unusual amongst parents in acknowledging 'credential half-life' (Tholen, 2017, p. 77), where the determining power of one's university credential would diminish over time. But she qualified this by asserting the power of affiliation with prestige, 'but, Eton will always be Eton, and Cambridge will always be Cambridge'.

In addition to this, some parents with older children who had gone through the recruitment process and secured jobs in management consulting articulated knowledge about specific advantages for Oxbridge graduates in the hiring process. They noted that it was common practice for students with a 2:1 degree from Oxford or Cambridge to be considered in the process, but for 'everywhere else' they would require a first class degree to be considered. In this way, Oxbridge graduates benefitted from assumptions about the rigor of their academic education, and were afforded advantages in the recruitment process as a result.

Parents questioning dominant narratives regarding the primacy of Oxbridge and elite professional careers

A small minority of parents questioned the primacy of Oxbridge, and some but fewer parents questioned the value of elite professional careers. However, it is important to identify that while some parents questioned the primacy of Oxbridge, all valued attendance at Russell Group universities. Further, while some questioned the value of elite professional careers such as law and banking, all parents wanted their children to achieve in the labour market, albeit in other sectors.

Lily, whose daughter Sophie was applying to study Natural Sciences at Cambridge, had studied Law at Cambridge herself. Based on her own experiences, Lily articulated both advantages, and possible pitfalls, of a Cambridge education. At the time, Sophie had applied to Cambridge but had yet to hear whether she had been called to interview.

Lily explained that Cambridge 'gives you a lot of confidence. When you build your life, you never have to apologise to anyone. You think, I don't care what you think, I feel quite confident in myself.' However, she was quick to note, 'Although at

the time I was there, I didn't feel that confident. You go from being absolutely hot in your old school to really mediocre amongst a whole pile of people, and you're feeling a little bit stupid, a bit lame. That's the scariest thing about going there, I think'.

Although Lily noted that her Cambridge education positioned her to move forward confidently in life subsequently, she conceded that being among such a high-achieving group of students was intimidating and fostered feelings of insecurity at the time. She explained that she had told her daughter that 'if she didn't get in to Cambridge, it's not the end of the world…' as other Russell Group universities would offer a 'more relaxed and less intense' experience, and the chance to be 'top-dog there'.

Lily explained that in her experience, with Cambridge on her CV 'nobody ever questions your intellectual ability…nobody ever has to question whether you're clever enough to do something.' The degree signalled intellectual prowess, which impressed others in a competitive and stratified society where educational achievement and credentials were highly valued. However, she was critical of the actual educational experience she had there, particularly regarding the teaching:

Actually, some of my education there was pretty rough actually…pretty much you just have to do it all yourself. And then you can talk to some people who are very high-falutin', some of which are terrible lecturers or teachers. We had to do it all ourselves. It's just a nice place to do it, it's just a library. With a nice setting. So I think…yes, you have access to all this, you have all these clever people there, but actually, the people that are the ones that are giving you the support are perhaps the postgraduates that are there, and not the teaching staff. And some of the teaching staff are fantastic and inspirational, and some of them are not. So I do think it's a…its not as fantastic as people make out, but if you get that on your CV, you're kind of set up.

Lily was one of the few parents to point to any negative aspects of an Oxbridge education. Some parents had not attended the universities themselves, and others had rosier and more distant memories of their time there. While Lily acknowledged that the degree had the power to facilitate success in the labour market by imbuing her with confidence and conveying intellectual prowess, she critiqued the nature of the actual education she had received, and pointed to the some of the downsides of being

around so many high-achieving peers, which fostered insecurity. She went on to contrast this with the 'image' that others had of Oxbridge who had not studied there.

Lily's remarks were based on her own experience at Cambridge a generation ago, but she argued that these downsides still held true today. Her view stood in contrast to James' assertion that the level of teaching and degree of structure provided at Oxford and Cambridge was superior to other universities. Notably, James did not attend Oxford or Cambridge, but he referred to reports from friends' children who currently attended the universities.

Although they were a minority amongst the parents I interviewed, other parents did call into question the primacy of academic achievement and educational prestige. Some also held views that differed from their own spouses. James described how he and his wife Margaret disagreed about the importance they attached to the academic exclusivity of the educational institutions that their children attended. He explained, 'I'm probably more concerned about the academic side than Margaret. She's always saying that's not the most important thing; its about your personality, and how you get on with other people that'll be determinate of how they get on in the world'.

While James had attended a grammar school, his wife had attended one of the most elite girls' boarding schools in the country, and her father and brothers had gone to Eton. It is important to distinguish between the views of the different kinds of elites that James and Margaret each represent. Like most Trinity parents, grammar-school educated James was a member of the 'pseudo-meritocratic' elite of salaried workers in high-earning sectors, who had secured his place there through the intersection of privilege and personal educational achievement.

It is important to recall the origins of the term 'meritocracy', which was coined by Young (1958) in a dystopian warning to society, as outlined in Chapter 2. Young and others (Markovitz, 2019; Sandel, 2020) have emphasised how an emphasis on academic achievement and a narrowly defined set of cognitive skills can be limiting to society and do not reflect the full range of human potential. In contrast to James, Margaret came from generations of wealth, where educational and professional achievement was less of an imperative, as socio-economic status was already secured. It is understandable that for Margaret, an affiliation with educational prestige was less important than one's 'personality', social skills, and ability to network with other members of the elite.

Few parents questioned the value of elite professional careers, but notably both of the fathers who participated in the research did so. As outlined previously, Ian, the head of a sixth form college and the father of Samantha, argued that his daughter should feel able to pursue a career in nursing. He perceived the field to be a good fit for his daughter's aptitudes and strengths, and he was dismayed that she had felt pressure to pursue medicine or neuroscience instead.

James, a private equity executive, did not want the same kind of career for his children. He explained that he wanted his children to 'take some more risks in [their] career[s], and really try and do something interesting, creative, and remunerative'. He said of his daughter Rose, 'Do I want Rose to become a great, top corporate lawyer? No. Do I want her to achieve? Yes…' He clarified that this was not a gendered wish for his daughter, which he did not also hold for his sons: 'I don't want the boys to be that, either. I don't want my children to be channelled into the very vanilla jobs', he articulated.

James did still want his children to 'achieve', but wanted them to do that through creative and entrepreneurial careers. He reflected on his own educational and professional trajectory and did not want his children to have the kind of career he had. He pointed to economic shifts, and argued that technology and outsourcing were causing 'the old respected professions (law, finance, accountancy)' to become 'commoditised', and compared them to a 'sausage machine'. James saw the creative fields as areas that were potentially more resilient to these economic shifts than the financial and legal fields (Brown et al., 2020).

However, he acknowledged the forms of privilege that enable young people to pursue 'creative' and 'entrepreneurial' careers, including parental financial support to see them through unpaid internships and other risks of these careers. It is important to acknowledge that although James advocated 'interesting, creative' careers for his children, he also perceived a need to 'make some reasonable money' with a 'mix of creative and business sense'. Therefore, while he was open to careers for his children that would be less remunerative than private equity, he hoped that they would be able to combine a fulfilling career with a comfortable financial situation.

Other parents like Parvati advocated the merits of taking time to explore different careers, and were wary of a race to jobs at 'Goldman [Sachs] or McKinsey', elite firms in banking and management consultancy respectively. Parvati's own experience of navigating the labour market in her twenties shaped her view. She

explained that she had dabbled in jobs in politics and in art galleries, before completing an MBA and working as an investment banker in London, Hong Kong, and Tokyo. Parvati was no longer employed outside the home. Like she had, Parvati wanted her daughter, who was applying to study Physics, to 'try lots of things, try lots of different jobs, and by the time you're 25 or 26, then you start your career'. She saw this as a way to guard against early 'burn out'. She explained:

And that's why I think today you see burn-outs, because kids are, oh, my God, I've got to do really well in prep school, then I have to do really well in secondary, then I have to go to the best university, and then not only do I have to go to the best university, I have to get a First every year...and they burn out.

Then I need to be at Goldman or McKinsey, or whatever are the other ones in their fields, and kids, people burn out. And so I'm kind of, peak later. I think I spent most of my university years half asleep. Never took a class before one o'clock, because I couldn't make it.

Parvati viewed her career trajectory as one where she 'peaked later', enjoying an easy life during university, and then going into banking later after her MBA. She described her former career in banking with some affection, but also recalled the gruelling hours and amount of rote work. It is significant that Parvati did not necessarily want her daughter to pursue that kind of career either, even later on. She explained:

I mean, the whole experience of you growing as a person and figuring out what you want and what you don't want ... university is a very crucial part of that. And I also feel once you graduate, don't go for that super-safe job. I keep telling her, work for a startup, live at home, work for a startup, and ... she's like, I won't be able to pay back my loan; I said, you don't have to pay back your loan till you make 21 grand, I think even a startup pays you that much, but I said, you'll be living at home, you'll be fine. I said, go and take some risks…

Parvati wanted her daughter to grow in self-understanding and make choices that reflected her daughter's own priorities, rather than simply following the path of the crowd around her into traditionally financially lucrative careers regarded as more safe

and stable than an entrepreneurial path. Parvati envisioned that her daughter could do this by taking 'risks' and working with a 'startup' company. There is privilege at work in the fact that, even though Parvati's daughter is expected to take out a loan to pay for university costs, she would be able to live with her parents in London for free after graduation to help her to repay the loan and build her career. As a result, if her daughter did decide to work for a startup company, it would not actually be as significant a risk as if she did not have this financial safety net.

The importance of 'happiness' and concerns about mental health

Other parents acknowledged the value of an Oxbridge degree in the labour market (Savage, 2015; The Sutton Trust, 2019a), but insisted that it was more important that young people chose the particular course that was the best match for their interests, whether that was at Oxbridge or not. They emphasised that they wanted their children to be happy at university, and did not wish to see them sacrifice that for a more prestigious university name on their CV. Lisa, who held a Law degree from a Russell Group university in London explained:

I think it's people perceive them to be the best places to go, so if you're the brightest that's where you should go. And, I do think that people think that a degree from there, means something, and it opens doors. My boss, he didn't go to Oxford, but when his daughter was applying she had an offer from Durham and an offer from Oxford, and I remember him saying to me, she doesn't like the course at Oxford, and she really loves the course at Durham, but we are talking to her, because we know, or I know, from experience, that having an Oxford degree will open doors.

She was applying for Italian. I just remember thinking at the time, I bit my tongue, and I didn't say anything, and I just felt I should have said to him at the time, you should let her go where she thinks she's going to be happiest. Because, of course, she started her degree at Oxford, and hated it, and she spent a whole first year trying to change her course.

But I just remembered that conversation that he had with me, that he thought the right thing to do was to go to Oxford because a degree from Oxford will open doors, and I think that's what people think. And, you know, there is a lot of truth in that, you do

look at someone's CV, I've looked at plenty of CVs, and if they do have an Oxford or Cambridge degree you think, smart. But, they don't have a monopoly on smart, because they can't take all the smart people.

Lisa's own daughter, Cora, was applying to Cambridge to study medicine and felt that the course was a good fit, so Lisa would not need to make a similar calculation in her case. Nevertheless, this family's story was a warning sign to Lisa that the pressure to attend Oxbridge could be taken too far, with serious effects on students' wellbeing and happiness. She was deeply attuned to the need to balance attention to labour marketing positioning and personal happiness. However, it is significant that the alternative to Oxford in this case, Durham, was also an elite Russell Group university, albeit just less elite.

Parvati, the mother of Talia, who applied to study Physics at Oxford and was not invited to interview, offered a stark statement about this. Her concerns were voiced by other parents, who felt able to talk about mental health issues and parental pressures in general terms, but did not delve deep into their own family dynamics. Parvati elaborated:

Everybody wants to be the superstar, but you know what? Not everyone who's a superstar is that happy, and not everyone's meant to be a superstar. So in a way, I do hope she gets Durham and she gets St Andrews, but in a way, I'm very relieved that she didn't get Oxford. I'm very OK.

I think there is more pressure from parents than I think parents are willing to admit, and then the kids have all the issues...and there are pupils at Trinity who have had [mental health challenges]. I've had three friends' daughters who've gone through that. Oh, my God, you don't want to pay that price. You don't want it; I would rather you go to, I don't know, like not a great uni, and you're just happy, frankly. Like a very average uni, and you're just happy, because…you have to go to family therapy and all that stuff …

While Parvati's assertion that parental pressure leads directly to mental health challenges can be refuted as an oversimplification of a complicated situation, her statement offered important insight about her priorities and values, and her desire to

minimise pressure to achieve that might come from her as a parent. She wanted her daughter to be 'happy' foremost, and was painfully aware of the cost of mental health challenges endured in the quest for achievement. Sun & Smith (2017) also raised the issue of affluent parents' concerns about children's mental health, in this case in the course of the US university admissions process, a salient finding even though the study was not situated within the context of the particular pressures of an elite school.

However, it is important to acknowledge here that Parvati does still admit that she hopes her daughter gets a place at another of the Russell Group universities to which she has applied. Taken in the context of the nation as a whole, this cannot accurately be described as being 'average', rather, within Parvati's privileged circles it is identified as an 'average' achievement.

Despite parents' concerns about happiness and mental health, and some of their insistence that they would be unconcerned if their children were not Oxbridge-bound, there was an underlying assumption that students would still go on to attend elite Russell Group universities. Parents did not imagine the possibility that their children would not do so, bolstered by the knowledge of the school's significant track record of Russell Group university attendance. Indeed, Lisa acknowledged that to not attend a Russell Group university would be seen as going 'off piste':

It's weird, because you slightly have to feel that you have to justify if you go off piste. So, a friend of mine, was at an academic school, a state academic school in Kingston, and has gone to study Anthropology at Kent. And, the course at Kent is supposed to be just phenomenal, and everyone in the anthropological world, they're there. Well, my friend just thinks this course for her daughter is amazing, but she slightly has to justify, well, she's gone to Kent, it's not Russell Group, but it's a really, really good course. And, it's odd that you need to do that, and I suppose it's the same with Oxford, if they're not applying to Oxford, but that's because they didn't want to. Do you know what I mean?

Lisa described the pressure to stay on a certain well-worn course, and the need to justify any moves that were 'off piste'. Certainly the decision not to attend a Russell Group university was regarded as such, and even the decision not to apply to Oxford or Cambridge she explained was considered surprising for an able student. While Lisa went on to lament the 'weird bubble' that constituted their social reality, she

nevertheless did not resist that reality or seriously explore alternative ways of acting and thinking.

Alice articulated how restrictive the narrow remit of acceptable achievement was, and conveyed the tension she felt as a mother, as she wished to shield her daughter from the weight of others' expectations and the pressures that resulted from them. She detailed a recent encounter while watching her younger son's rowing race. Alice had been chatting with the mother of one of her son's crewmates by the banks of the river when Alice's sixth form daughter, Charlotte, rode up on her bike to watch the race as well. After Alice introduced them briefly and her daughter had moved on, the other mother peppered Alice with questions. "Where is she at school? What does she want to do [at university]?" Alice noted that the questioning came 'straight away'. 'Sometimes you just want to say, she's thinking about doing road sweeping, just to be controversial, to take the pressure off it', Alice said. She explained that if said her daughter was applying for medicine, and then she did not go down that route, perhaps because she had changed her mind even, and not necessarily because she had applied and did not get a place, 'people will ask what went wrong'.

Discussion

In sum, there were clear areas of agreement between the school and many Trinity parents in their respective emphases on academic achievement and their desires to direct students towards elite university destinations. Parents viewed elite university entrance as a means to secure future economic and social status. They saw an Oxbridge degree as important for accessing elite employment nationally and globally, but they also pointed to its social benefits. Echoing Weis et al.'s (2014) framework of parents' pursuit of elite university admissions for their children as a form of 'class warfare', parents articulated the appeal of Oxbridge grounded in its position at the top of a status hierarchy of universities. They pointed to how the universities provided access to elite social networks, and shielded their graduates from being on the wrong side of judgements grounded in 'snobbery'. With the exception of Weis et al. (2014) writing in a US context, the social as well as economic aspects of this positioning, including the 'snobbery' and the access to elite social networks that parents discussed are less commonly articulated in the literature.

However, parents varied in the degree to which they emphasised the importance of Oxbridge entrance as well as subsequent participation in elite professional careers, with its attendant implications for economic and social status, as elucidated in Chapter 7. Some parents critiqued these dominant narratives. They were attuned to affective concerns about their children's mental health and confidence, and were wary of the possible negative effects of pressure to achieve. This reflects work that has challenged the view of the parent – child relationship as 'goal-oriented' (Ramaekers & Suissa, 2011), with more emphasis on parents' 'duties' than on the intimate bond of love and care (Edwards & Gillies, 2011). The findings here speak to an important gap in the literature, as there is a need for more accounts of 'parenting' that are attuned to parents' conflicted experiences, including affective concerns about their children's wellbeing, and of the possible negative effects of pressure to achieve.

However, it is important to acknowledge the privilege inherent in some parents' discussions of the importance of reducing the pressure on their children to achieve highly. It can be argued that parents were already relatively secure in the knowledge that their children's chances of securing entry to an elite Russell Group university were very high, a function of the combined advantages of attending an elite school and growing up in affluent families with significant experience of elite universities. In particular, it was clear that pressure was already being applied at school, through the ways that the school emphasised academic achievement, elite university entrance, and a sense of personal responsibility for attaining these outcomes. Therefore parents could in a sense afford to discuss tempering the pressure somewhat at home. Indeed Irwin and Elley (2011) argued that amongst middle-class parents, 'where circumstances and background meant they were less likely to assume their children's educational success', they found 'a more strategic orientation to their children's education' (p. 492).

Further, whilst many parents were willing to downplay the importance of Oxbridge entrance, particularly if it was seen to jeopardise a student's happiness or wellbeing, importantly, Russell Group university entrance was seen as non-negotiable for their daughters. While some questioned the value of elite professional careers such as law and banking, all parents wanted their children to achieve in the labour market, albeit in other sectors. Ideally parents wanted their children to achieve highly, but without significant cost to their overall wellbeing.

Chapter 8: Discussion

Introduction

This thesis makes a major contribution to the study of elite schooling by putting it into sustained dialogue with the literature around the 'concerted cultivation' (Lareau, 2011) enacted by middle-class parents. It also reframes Lareau's ideas around 'concerted cultivation' in important new ways, using 'concerted' to signal mutually reinforcing work carried out by multiple actors in relationship with one another. Finally, it highlights the importance of attending to the tensions that are part of working collectively and 'in concert'.

First, I have shown how one can see an elite school as closely engaged in 'concerted cultivation' in terms of its work to help students negotiate elite university admissions. One can conceptualise the school as performing a parenting role, in the way that it enacts 'concerted cultivation' work. This lens on the elite school is an important one, as it illuminates the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools work to systematically secure advantage for their students in the context of elite university admissions. These ranged from: the development of particular kinds of academic selves that led students to seek out the particular kind of learning that Oxbridge facilitates, and directly prepared them to be academically competitive applicants; the deployment of the biographies of teachers and past pupils to both foster an affective affinity with elite universities, as well as offer practical direction-finding guidance for the journey, and the organisational work of overseeing and monitoring the students' applications to ensure their timely and effective completion. This level of empirical detail has been neglected in the elite schooling literature to date.

Second, I have shown how the work of ensuring elite university entrance is the result of the mutually reinforcing actions of multiple actors, not only encompassing parents and the school, but also students themselves, and private tutors—I have termed this 'cultivation in concert', deploying an orchestral musical metaphor. This marks an important contribution to the field of elite schooling, which has tended to neglect the role of parents and private tutors in shaping young people and their trajectories. It also makes a fruitful contribution to studies of 'concerted cultivation',

which have not paid serious attention to the roles of multiple actors working together, and the complexities of this work.

Third, drawing on this metaphor I illuminated the complexity of 'cultivation in concert', showing how this collaborative work between different actors was also charged with inherent disagreements and tensions among them. In this way, I made visible the complex relationships and realities of how privilege is enacted on-the-ground, in order to facilitate a more nuanced understanding of how educational advantage is (re)produced.

The elite school in a parenting role

While Lareau (2011) developed the theoretical framework of 'concerted cultivation' to explain the childrearing approaches of middle-class parents, I take the concept beyond the realm of parents and bring it to bear on the elite school, to argue that the elite school itself operates in a kind of parenting role, enacting 'concerted cultivation' work to actively shape students in particular ways. This is important in order to better understand the practical work that the elite school enacts to move students towards elite university destinations. Whereas for Lareau (2011), 'concerted cultivation' work was argued to abstractly advantage students in the educational system, I showed explicitly how this advantage was instated in the context of university admissions. Importantly, I showed how the school took on the role of developing the students in its charge in a way that directly primed them for successful admission to the most selective and prestigious universities in the UK (outlined in detail in Chapter 5).

This marks an important contribution to the field of elite schooling, where there has been a lack of attention to the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools work to systematically secure advantage for their students in the context of elite university admissions, as I outlined in Chapter 3. The existing literature has conceptualised how elite schools confer advantages primarily through the lenses of 'institutional habitus' and 'social and cultural capital stocks' (Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019), which connote passive processes. Using the lens of 'concerted cultivation' in this thesis, with its attendant emphasis on effortful action, effectively captures the nature of the work that the elite school enacts. Through a focus on the school's work of 'concerted cultivation', I make explicit how privilege is

manifested at an everyday level in the concrete contours of the university admissions process.

This also marks an important departure from the growing school of 'concerted cultivation' literature, where this literature tends to focus on the sociology of parenting, and does not pay sufficient attention to the roles of schools themselves in shaping young people. This institutional level of analysis was not part of the remit of Lareau's (2011) study, and other studies of 'concerted cultivation', which have focused attention primarily or exclusively on the context of the family (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Perrier, 2013; Sherman, 2017; Wheeler, 2018). In this way, I developed Lareau's (2011) theoretical framework further to better understand how multiple actors work to instate educational advantage, and how elite schools function in ways that resemble parents and families.

The range of knowledge, skills, experiences, and supports in the school setting that facilitated students' trajectories were explored in depth, and the organisational, social, and academic dimensions of the school's 'concerted cultivation' work were identified (Chapter 5). Each of these dimensions marks an important contribution to the elite schooling literature.

Organisationally, I showed how the elite school worked at an institutional level to direct students towards elite university destinations, and enacted the kind of managerial work typically carried out by parents in the extant literature (Chiang, 2018; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014), overseeing and monitoring the students' applications to ensure their timely and effective completion. In terms of social and affective processes, whilst parental biographies were important for fostering a sense of connection and belonging with elite universities, I showed how the biographies of teachers and past pupils were too, and how these were deployed to advantage Trinity students in university admissions, by both fostering an affective affinity with these institutions, as well as offering practical direction-finding guidance for the journey. This marks an important contribution to the elite schooling literature, as the social and affective resources that elite schools provide their students have been under theorised with regard to their concrete implications for the reproduction of privilege through elite university admissions (as outlined in Chapter 3).

Within the elite schooling literature, the academic and intellectual facet of students' experiences has also been surprisingly neglected (see Khan, 2011 and Forbes & Lingard, 2015 for exceptions), and where the topic is analysed, connections

are not made in terms of how the inculcation of certain aptitudes and skills concretely positions students advantageously for admission to elite universities. Further, the 'concerted cultivation' literature on parenting has tended to emphasise extra-curricular development (Lareau, 2011; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016; Yemini et al., 2019), and to neglect the academic and intellectual dimension of students' formation. Working in both of these respective gaps, I showed how the school carried out an important academic dimension of 'concerted cultivation' work, as it encouraged Trinity students to develop particular kinds of academic selves that both led them to seek out the particular kind of learning that Oxbridge facilitates, and directly prepared them to be academically competitive applicants.

Lareau (2011) argued that the 'concerted cultivation' approach to parenting developed attributes in children that were highly valued and advantageous in the school setting. I argue that the inverse is also true—that the school developed dispositions and skills in young people (Chapter 5) that were highly valued in their families (Chapter 7)—that is, dispositions and skills that facilitated successful applications to elite universities.

This marks an important contribution to studies of elite schooling as well as to reconceptualising 'concerted cultivation'. Where Lareau and Weininger (2008) argued that working-class and low-income parents viewed the provision of university applications assistance as the 'responsibility of "the school"', and in contrast middle-class parents conceptualised the process as a 'familial one', where parents worked to monitor, manage, and organise the process to a much greater extent (p. 119), in contrast, I found that affluent Trinity families viewed the process as primarily the responsibility of the elite school. The school was largely entrusted to manage the university applications process successfully. This sense of assurance was a clear form of privilege grounded in Trinity's position as an elite independent school in London with a strong track record of Russell Group university admissions.

These findings also counter Wheeler's (2018) analysis. Wheeler suggested that the extent to which parents employed 'concerted cultivation' parenting practices was 'gradational', where the upper-middle-class 'cultivate[ed] more intensively' than the mid-middle-class, which did so more intensively than the lower-middle-class. Here, very affluent parents were able to pay to outsource some 'cultivation' work, through tuition at an elite school, rather than carry it out directly themselves.

Where some studies have attempted to conceptualise the elite school itself as carrying out 'concerted cultivation', these conceptualisations have suffered from oversimplification, and lacked multidimensionality, framing the 'cultivation' as exclusively 'outsourced' to the school (Ying & Wright, 2021), rather than the product of complex mutually reinforcing work among multiple actors. Importantly, the Chinese parents in Ying and Wright's (2021) study differed from most Trinity parents as they did not have first-hand experience of the admissions process for the universities their children were targeting in the UK and US. This made them particularly reliant and dependent on the school and private counsellors for expertise, 'outsourcing' 'concerted cultivation' work to those actors. Because of these parents' own lack of relevant knowledge in this area, they experienced a strong degree of distrust of the school's provision and even the efficacy of the private counsellors' work, as they were not able to provide a check on the process.

Instead, I found that Trinity parents showed a strong degree of trust in the elite school and viewed it as a collaborative partner, cultivating 'in concert' with the school, as well as their own children, and that private tutors were employed to address academic subjects, but not to supervise the overall university application (that was a combination of the school and parents). Such was the level of families' trust in the school in a kind of parenting role that, although most parents monitored the contours of the university applications process and were ready to step in to intervene if needed, most parents did not in fact 'micromanage' the process (Weis et al., 2014) or 'embrace the idea that it was their responsibility to carefully manage every step of their children's transition' to university (Lareau, 2011, p. 287), as was the case in other accounts of affluent parenting. The elite school helped direct and steer students towards elite university destinations, lessening the need for parents to aggressively do this themselves. Parents were able to secure this level of support by paying to send their children to an elite school. Indeed it was a kind of privilege wherein most parents, albeit to varying degrees, did not feel the need to 'cultivate' (Lareau, 2011) their children intensively along the way, as the elite school did much of this 'cultivation' for them.

In sum, many Trinity parents trusted the school and its provision for elite university admissions, viewing it as a 'safe pair of hands' and a 'steady ship' (Lisa), as expressed in Chapter 6. Indeed there was a clear well-travelled path from Trinity School to Russell Group universities, with scarcely any students deviating from this

trajectory each year. Parents could therefore safely cede much of the work of 'concerted cultivation' to the school, rather than carry it out themselves. In this way, the school performed the role of comprehensive manager of students' university-bound trajectories, a role often performed by parents, particularly mothers in much of the extant literature (Ball, 2003; Hamilton, 2016; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2007; Van Zanten, 2015; Vincent, 2017; Weis et al., 2014). Through attendance at an elite private school, parents are able to access a particular level of privilege where, barring some exceptional circumstances, many did not feel the need to micromanage students' educational trajectories because they had been able to secure passage on such a 'steady ship'.

Cultivation 'in concert'

While 'concerted cultivation' is a fruitful theoretical framework, a limitation as it is currently conceived in the literature is it lacks multidimensionality. This is necessary in order to better understand the complex social context of elite schooling, where the school, students, parents, and private tutors work together to instate educational advantage. I moved beyond a conceptualisation of how parents enact 'concerted cultivation', or even how the elite school does this, but instead conceptualised how multiple actors worked in relationship with one another to carry out cultivation 'in concert'. Rather than merely 'outsourced' to actors outside the family, such as the school or private tutors (Ying & Wright, 2021), this cultivation was worked at from multiple mutually reinforcing angles, where parents played an important role in relationship with other actors. The term 'concerted' indeed connotes work undertaken by actors united in action or purpose, that is, working 'in concert', however this connotation is neglected by Lareau (2011) and those who draw upon her theoretical framework. A musical metaphor is particularly illustrative, that flows from this understanding of 'concerted' as made up of multiple parts working in relationship with one another.

This marks a very important theoretical contribution to the field of elite schooling, by widening the frame of analysis to encompass the work of multiple actors who are part of a web of complex relationships. In this way, it facilitates a more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of how educational advantage is instated.

An important facet of this is the malleability of private schools to work 'in concert' with affluent families, and how the school was used by affluent students and their parents to advance their agendas. An important contribution of this thesis to the field of elite schooling is its attention to the micro-level detail of how educational advantage is instated through the relationship between school, students, and parents, where students and parents petition the school for extra support, accommodations, or exceptions.

The case of predicted grades

The case of how students and parents negotiated predicted grades with the school (Chapter 6) provided a powerful illustration of this process at work, with important implications for the university admissions process (which I will outline further in Chapter 9). Parents and students showed high levels of entitlement to have their needs met in the context of the school (Calarco, 2018; Lareau, 2011), and this was shaped by parents' own biographies of high educational and professional achievement and 'getting what they want' (Alice).

Further, while other accounts of 'concerted cultivation' work focused only on the work that parents themselves did, the findings in Chapter 6 illustrated how this approach was conveyed inter-generationally, as students learned to enact 'concerted cultivation' work for themselves. Students' management of their own educational trajectories included navigating hierarchies both inside of school (Calarco, 2018; Khan, 2011; Taylor, 2021) and outside of it, as well as peer relationships, in order to advance their individual agendas in the university admissions process.

The particular site of predicted grades yields fruitful analysis of the ways in which students carried out 'concerted cultivation' work for themselves, but how this work was mutually reinforced by other actors—the school, their parents, and private tutors. Through a confident sense of entitlement students petitioned to raise their grades to a level that would make them viable candidates for elite university admissions. Parents were poised to intervene and elevate the issue up the school's hierarchy if the accommodations were not initially granted.

Significantly, when students and parents asked for accommodations and exceptions, they were usually granted. Teachers could often be persuaded to raise predicted grades, a practice which significantly improved students' candidacies for

elite university admissions. It is important to recognise that in many cases teachers at the elite school were presented with choices when petitions were made, that in these situations they agreed to collaborate with student and parent agendas, and this consent was pivotal to students and parents' ability to achieve their goals. Further, in some cases conditions were given wherein the predicted grades would be raised provided that the families engaged private tuition to help raise student performance in the months before the final examinations. The case of Samantha in Chapter 6 illustrated this, and the student was able to secure the exam grades that she needed to gain entrance to a Russell Group university, through an effortful and financially costly system of mutually reinforcing forms of privilege that collectively worked to minimise the risk of not attending an elite university. In this way, these multiple actors worked 'in concert' to move students towards elite universities.

The exceptions and accommodations granted by teachers at Trinity shows the extent to which elite schools are particularly malleable, and the quantity and nature of the petitions posed to these teachers reflects the particular intensity of the sense of entitlement found in elite school students and their parents as they negotiate university admissions. In a mutually reinforcing process, elite private schools smooth pathways towards success with intense attention to the individual, and this both fortifies and appeals to affluent families' sense of entitlement. Calarco (2018) identified the power dynamics at work in a school (in her case a state school in an affluent area of the US) where parents can bring significant economic and other forms of power to bear, and this is particularly true when the school in question is charging high fees and dealing with London's global elite professional class. I showed how these dynamics had very concrete academic implications for students as they negotiated university admissions.

The role of tutors

The findings in this thesis also conceptualised the importance of tutors as performing a kind of parenting role in the context of the elite school, through the 'concerted cultivation' work that they carried out. This marks a significant contribution to the elite schooling literature, in which the role of private tuition that takes place outside of the walls of the school has not been sufficiently brought out of the shadows and explored in depth.

Importantly, I conceptualised the role of tutors as situated in relationship with other actors, working 'in concert' with them through these complex relationships to advantage students. This conceptualisation moves the framework of 'concerted cultivation' forward to analyse a multi-actor nexus of educational advantage. Essentially, where there were gaps in provision from the school, and where there was conflict within family relationships, tutors frequently smoothed out the rough edges to help instate privilege.

The work of private subject tutors has been depicted in the relevant literature as academic in nature (Chiang, 2018; Lareau, 2011; Weis et al., 2014). However, I showed how tutors also fortified and made possible important socio-emotional work for the school, its students, and their parents. At the school level, whilst Trinity School endeavoured to create confident university applicants among their students (Chapter 5), students varied in the extent to which they actually manifested these dispositions. This offers a counter narrative to much of the literature on elite schooling, which depicts students' formation as confident subjects as a seamless and automatic process (Fahey, 2014; Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019). This also calls into question to what extent the elite school is responsible for imbuing this kind of confidence in students, and to what extent it is the product of extra investment through private tuition.

Whilst Chapter 5 analysed the ways that students did develop an appetite for academic challenge, and a comfort level with independent thinking and debate for example, Chapter 6 explicated how many students, including those who held leadership positions in the school, still experienced self-doubt and fear of failure as they negotiated the university applications process. Chapter 6 suggested the extent to which this is gendered, where similarly privileged boys may display greater measures of confidence and self-belief (as suggested by Mr Williams' comparison of teaching Trinity students with his experience teaching boys at Eton, the elite boys' boarding school). Many studies of elite schooling focus on boarding schools where students must learn to develop high levels of confidence and independence in order to lead lives that are removed from the immediate support of their families. In contrast, Trinity School only has day pupils, and this may shape students' affective horizons in particular ways.

Significantly, tutors stepped in to shore up students' confidence, thereby working 'in concert' with the elite school to produce confident students. This marks

an important contribution, showing how much of this 'confidence' work happened outside the school walls. Students' confidence had important consequences, as it both directly helped them in their studies, and facilitated more effective navigation of dynamics with teachers at the school (as elucidated in the cases of Clara and Samantha in Chapter 6). In this way, the findings drew out the importance of this socio-emotional facet of learning and navigating towards university.

In families, tutors helped circumvent tense parent-child relationships that threatened to impede parents' efforts to assist their children. Despite ubiquitously high levels of affluence, I showed how Trinity parents varied in their abilities to enact 'concerted cultivation' work such as anticipating problems and intervening to resolve them (Chapter 6). Parents' abilities to support their children were shaped by parents' knowledge of how their daughters were progressing in school, and the wider context of the school's university preparation. Because the school limited direct communication with parents (in order to attempt to foster a sense of students' independence in the process), parents' access to this knowledge was directly influenced by their relationships with their own daughters. This illustrated the complexity of parenting, going beyond existing accounts of parental intervention (Lareau, 2011; Van Zanten, 2015; Weis et al., 2014) to draw more attention to the parent-child relationship, and showing how often relationships with teenagers are fraught with tension. In this way, I showed how some parents experienced constraints in the extent to which they were able to enact 'concerted cultivation'.

Significantly, Chiang (2018) explored inequality and variation even amongst affluent parents, who all possessed high levels of 'cultural capital' in the form of knowledge of the educational system, yet in some rare cases some parents failed to activate this capital even when their children were struggling within the system. However, Chiang did not explore the reasons why parents failed to do this, and this thesis works within this gap to explicate barriers to parental intervention in the university admissions process. Further, I showed how in these cases, tutors stepped in to work in 'concert' with parents to help them achieve their aims.

Disagreement and tensions while working 'in concert'

This conceptualisation of the 'cultivation' work of students, parents, the school, and private tutors as conducted 'in concert' with one another is necessary in order to better understand the complex social context of elite schooling, where different actors' agendas sometimes align and other times come into conflict with other another. The orchestral metaphor allows conceptual space for attention to relative harmony between the actors, but also dissonance and tensions. The findings highlighted the complex social relationships between these multiple actors, and showed how the reproduction of privilege was not a smooth and seamless process.

This conceptualisation moves beyond Sun & Smith's (2017) notion of 'collaborative cultivation', articulated as solely between parents and private consultants, which oversimplifies the nature of the cultivation work (as well as lacking attention to the pivotal work of the school—their study was not carried out in the context of elite schooling—as well as the role of students in enacting this work themselves). Rather, my findings showed how 'cultivation' work involved complex relationships and interactions between multiple actors—parents, students, school, and tutors, which importantly was also charged with multiple areas of disagreements and tension, as well as synergistic collaboration.

Cultivation for different reasons

One facet of these tensions was inherent in the different motivations that underpinned actors' actions. This was brought out in the different accounts offered in Chapters 5 and 7. While there was a clear correspondence between parents' desires for students to secure places at elite Russell Group universities, particularly Oxbridge, and students' own desires to attain these same goals, different rationales underpinned students' and parents' respective 'cultivation' work towards these ends. A large part of students' rationales for applying to Oxbridge were grounded in emerging academic identities and desires for intellectual growth, that they believed would be fostered by the particular kind of pedagogies found in the tutorial system at the universities. Parents, in contrast, framed the appeal of the universities primarily through the prism of the pursuit of economic and social status.

In this analysis, the competitive neoliberal ethos underpinning many parents' views of university admissions, and their attendant anxieties, were brought to the fore. Shedding light on this particular kind of elite, which encompasses most parents at Trinity School is important. Drawing on Savage (2015) and Markovitz (2019), I term these parents a 'pseudo-meritocratic' elite (outlined in the discussion of affluent London parenting in Chapter 2). The London 'pseudo-meritocratic' elite emphasised academic, professional, and economic achievement as routes for their children to secure status within a socio-economically stratified society in which they conceptualised their position as precarious. In this way, entrance to elite universities was seen as an important pathway to securing an elite future. Students' agendas were more idealistic, primarily concerned with notions of personal and intellectual growth through academic challenge at what they saw as the highest level. In this way, it is important to elucidate that while parents and students shared similar goals, that of elite university entrance, they were at times underpinned by very different rationales.

Parents in relationship with other actors

Importantly, the findings showed how parents did not act in silos, but in relationship with other actors—their own children, the school, and other parents. The conceptualisation of these actors as working 'in concert' allowed for a better understanding of parents' experiences, which were often conflicted. This conceptualisation creates space for variation, complexity, and tensions inherent in parents' work, which was collaborative and multi-layered.

Parents found themselves in agreement, and also in conflict with the school's emphasis on elite university entrance (Chapter 7). While valuing these destinations, they also worried about how to balance achievement with ensuring that students' confidence was fostered and mental health preserved. They did not opt out of the competitive arena of elite university admissions, however, but tried to minimise the negative effects of competition in it. The findings here speak to an important gap in the literature, as there is a need for more accounts of 'parenting' that are deeply attuned to parents' conflicted experiences, including affective concerns about their children's wellbeing, and of the possible negative effects of pressure to achieve. In highlighting a range of these tensions, this thesis makes an important contribution. While more critical sociological accounts of affluent parenting portrayed parents as

engaged in nothing short of 'class warfare' (Weis et al., 2014), this research instead revealed a very human side to their parenting. These parents were wary about pressures that could negatively affect their children's mental health or confidence.

Parents' agendas were shaped by, and at times came into conflict with, those of other parents too, as they acted 'in concert' with knowledge and perceptions of other parents' actions. Parents expressed the desire to mobilise resources available to maximise advantages for their children, peer pressure from other parents to do this, and 'fear of missing out' and disadvantaging their children compared to other elite school peers. At the same time, many also wrestled with ethical questions of when to withhold resources and how to 'keep it real', and how to foster their children's independence. It is important to illuminate the ethical quandaries parents faced as they parented in the context of privilege (Sherman, 2017, 2019), which to date has not been explored with particular regard to elite private schooling.

The conceptualisation of parents' 'cultivation' work as carried out 'in concert' with other actors is important in order to more effectively do justice to the experience of being a parent, in all its complexity. Where literature on affluent parents' engagement with university admissions has depicted them as supremely strategic, single-minded actors (Lareau, 2011; Weis et al., 2014), the reality is one that is inflected with a great deal of tension. I showed parents' very human self-doubt (Chapters 6 and 7), how they wrestled with how to attempt to act ethically (Chapter 6), and how they tried to foster children's wellbeing and shield them from excessive pressure (Chapter 7), yet working within a system that was inherently competitive and pressurised.

Tensions between the collective and the individual in the context of the elite school

Another important contribution this thesis makes to literature on elite schooling and university admissions, through its conceptualisation of 'cultivation' as taking place 'in concert' among multiple actors, is its attention to conflicting agendas between individual students and the collective year group at the school. There is a lack of attention in the elite schooling literature to the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools work to systematically maximise admissions success for the *collective* year group, and how this affects the experiences of individual students.

Where this is discussed to some extent (see Khan, 2011 in a US university admissions context), the work is depicted as a largely seamless, frictionless process, and the perspectives of students and parents on this process are not included (Khan, 2011). Lareau (2011) also presents a picture of smooth relationships between affluent families and the school in her work.

However, the findings showed there was a fundamental point of tension and potential conflict of aims between the elite school, charged with shepherding an entire year group of students towards elite university destinations, and students and their parents, primarily focused on one individual outcome in the process. In particular, tensions between the advancement of the collective and the individual through the process of negotiating predicted grades, and the process of strategic Oxbridge college choices were illuminated (Chapter 6).

Conclusions

In sum, this thesis makes important contributions to the field of elite schooling through developing Lareau's ideas in a fruitful new direction in its conceptualisation of 'cultivation in concert'. In the context of elite schooling, the concept of 'cultivation in concert' helps to illuminate the concrete, direct processes through which elite schools worked to systematically secure advantage for their students in the context of elite university admissions, whilst making space to conceptualise the mutual work of other actors in the process. Moving students towards elite universities entailed a complex orchestration of the school, students, parents, and tutors, where the work of each must be analysed in relationship with one another, and where the process was not perfectly seamless and smooth. This marks an important contribution to the field of elite schooling, which has neglected the relationship between the schools, parents and private tutors in shaping young people and their trajectories. It also makes a significant contribution to studies of 'concerted cultivation', by showing how multiple actors work together, and the complexities of this work.

In the next chapter I bring together some of the possible implications of the findings, in terms of possible futures for private schooling and for widening participation at elite universities, as well as suggesting areas for further research.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

This research explored the contours of how an elite London independent girls' school, its students, and their parents negotiated university admissions. In this vein, the characteristics of Trinity School and the families whose children attend mean that the findings outlined in this thesis will be resonant in contexts of academically selective elite schools more generally, particularly in global financial centres such as London. The research also suggested that there are particular ways in which female students experience and negotiate elite schools, and this work contributes to scholarship on elite girls' schooling.

Empirically, the study also contributes to work on the role of private tuition in the context of elite schooling. It is important to acknowledge that this phenomenon is particularly acute in the London day school context. The attention paid in this study to the role of private tutors enhances our understanding of how privilege is instated from multiple reinforcing angles. Advantage was conferred by the families themselves, but also by the specialised experts with whom they could afford to contract.

Methodologically, the single-sited focus of this research and the attention paid to multiple actors—school, students, parents, and even private tutors—allowed for a fine-grained conceptualisation of how these actors worked in 'concert'. This intense focus on the particular of this site allowed for a better understanding of the complex nature of this collective work, and the tensions therein, than studies of elite schooling that have often straddled multiple school sites.

Areas for future research

As outlined in Chapter 4, it would be fruitful to explore the perspectives of students' fathers, and of mothers who were currently employed full-time in the labour market. Future research would benefit from their perspectives. However, the composition of my research participants reflected the composition of the mothers at the school, where a significant majority were not employed full-time outside the home. Further, it was clear from conversations with mothers and their daughters that in most cases mothers were the ones who undertook close engagement with the university applications process more so than fathers, a finding supported by the extant

literature on affluent parenting (for example, Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2011; Vincent, 2017).

Weis et al. (2014) asserted that there is a kind of power in the fact that this work is carried out by women. They argued that this positions women at the 'epicentre of new class productions and outcomes' through their shaping of their children's trajectories, whereas in a past 'industrial context' it was men who were at the fulcrum of 'class analysis and class struggle' (p. 104). However, the fact that this work is seen as the 'responsibility' of mothers (Lareau, 2011, p. 287) also reflects a traditional gendered division of labour wherein the domain of childrearing, in all its forms, is constructed as women's work. Further, there is likely to be a connection between these mothers' lack of full-time participation in the labour market, and the assumption of this time-intensive role. Future research could fruitfully examine how these mothers negotiate and experience the roles that they perform in the family.

Another horizon for future research is the exploration of the extent and ways in which parents continue to enact 'concerted cultivation' work when their children are at university in the UK (for a fruitful examination of this in a US context, see Hamilton, 2016). The transition of privately educated students to university is an important area to examine, where students are accustomed to a level of individualised attention often resembling 'handholding' that is seldom provided by university-level academics. In this vein, future work could also examine to what extent students engage private tuition or other forms of academic support at the university level.

University admissions: possible futures

The findings illuminated a broader conceptualisation of educational advantage, as composed not only of type of school attended (i.e. private or state-funded), but in the complex intersection between the school, family, and private tuition. This is important, and has implications for university admissions policies designed to widen participation at elite universities. The growing movement to contextualise admissions at universities demands a sophisticated understanding of applicants' contexts, grounded in relevant data (as outlined in Chapter 2). While contextual admissions policies should be informed by specific and fine-grained data on applicants' relative disadvantage, universities could improve the way they measure

gradations of advantage as well, to account for the complexity of candidates' experiences.

In this vein, the findings highlighted variation and differences in the experiences of students and of parents, disrupting ideas about the homogenous experiences of affluent parents (Lareau, 2011) and students (Fahey, 2014; Forbes & Lingard, 2015; Forbes & Maxwell, 2019). In this way, this work calls attention to the unevenness of privilege where gender, affect (varying confidence levels), parental biographies (those who have experienced social mobility in their life course), and parental networks (whether they are well-connected in a students' desired career field or not) work for or against students in particular uneven ways.

Importantly, the findings showed how parents' own biographies, and experiences of social mobility (if applicable) shaped their orientations towards intervention in the school and propensity to engage private tuition (elucidated in the cases of Alice, Lisa, and Frances in Chapter 6). Although a sensitive topic, voluntarily disclosed information on applicants' parents' experiences of social mobility would help to illuminate differences between students who ostensibly seem similarly privileged due to type of school attended, but in fact are differentially positioned in relation to elite university admissions.

Further, although there has been progress in UK university admissions processes to identify how independent school pupils are advantaged at the point of application by their schooling, the influence of private tuition remains in the shadows. Indeed, students do not disclose on their applications if they have received private tuition, although the type of school attended is known. The findings showed how private tutors played an important role in positioning students for elite university entrance, beyond the provision of academic support. This included help in navigating hierarchies in the school, and shoring up students' academic confidence.

This thesis emphasised the multiple, mutually reinforcing forms of advantage from which the most privileged university applicants benefit. As a result, if elite universities are to more effectively recognise students' academic potential, a compelling case can be made for the need for more elite universities (including Oxford and Cambridge) to make lower grade offers to applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, in recognition of the very different circumstances in which their prior academic attainment was achieved.

The findings of this thesis also illuminated how mutually reinforcing forms of advantage make it possible for elite school students to strategically raise predicted grades if needed to ensure they are viable candidates for admission to elite universities, through a combination of petitioning the school (with parental intervention if needed), and engaging private tuition. As a result of these dynamics, the manipulation of predicted grades is another arena in which educational privilege is manifested. This lends further credence to the recently accelerating movement (endorsed by university vice-chancellors in November 2020) to move to a system of post-qualification admissions, wherein students apply to universities after they have already received their examination results. This would eliminate the need for predicted grades, and help to address inequality in the admissions process.

It is important to recognise that the field of university admissions is constantly evolving, and that as political leaders come into and out of power, the corresponding agendas shift. Moreover, in the course of important work to ensure greater justice and fairness in elite university admissions, there is a danger in taking the stratification of institutional status hierarchies in the higher education landscape for granted, where the goal is to simply to make sure that those with the most 'merit' are positioned at the 'top' at certain elite Russell Group universities.

Private schooling: possible futures

As contextualised admissions policies gain ground among universities, there has been corresponding unease in the private sector over fears that elite schools may no longer provide a relatively assured pathway to elite universities. The current situation is a mixed picture. While Masters (2021) cites fewer recent offers made to pupils at some private schools (including Eton), the proportion of Oxbridge offers made to Trinity pupils has held constant. Further the findings of this thesis showed a broader picture of the educational advantage elite schools provide, including a relatively high degree of malleability through which students are able to secure exceptions and special accommodations when challenges arise.

Recent scholarship has questioned the future of private schools and if significant policy reforms might be instated (Green & Kynaston, 2019). These could range from complete abolition of the private sector, to a return to a government-funded assisted places scheme at private schools to encourage greater socio-economic

diversity of pupils. Questions remain as to whether elite universities will implement official quotas regarding the numbers of privately educated students they admit.

However, the findings of this thesis called attention to the role of private tuition as a part of the nexus of instating educational advantage, and significantly, unlike the elite school, it is a part which often remains invisible. For example, it is conceivable to imagine affluent families strategising in response to reforms, and investing in private tuition whilst their children are enrolled at state grammar schools or high-performing comprehensive schools in affluent parts of the country. When taken to an extreme, such an idea begins to evoke an unsettling return to an age when aristocratic families did not use so-called 'public' schools, but educated their children at home by private tutors.

Further, it is notable that many elite schools have increased their university advising provision in recent years to encompass US universities (Green & Kynaston, p. 111). This marks an important area of future research, as elite schools adapt and respond to increasing equity and access efforts at elite UK universities that will in turn affect private school applicants. (In a US context, even privileged UK applicants provide a certain kind of diversity through their international backgrounds, and it seems that elite schools know this.) This preparation and positioning is likely to represent an increasingly important facet of elite schools' ongoing and adaptive 'concerted cultivation' work.

Another question on the horizon for private schools, and elite universities, is the possible impact of moves towards 'CV-blind' recruitment at some elite professional services firms (Tholen, 2017, p. 63), as outlined in Chapter 2. While this may threaten the power of elite credentials to some extent, this thesis has illustrated how the elite school is just one part of a broader picture of educational advantage worked at by multiple actors including families and private tutors. Further, pupils at elite schools nevertheless benefit from the myriad organisational, academic, and social dimensions of 'concerted cultivation' work that these schools enact (as outlined in Chapter 5), including the development of particular kinds of academic selves that imbue students with a degree of intellectual confidence, and the fostering of relationships and networks that are strategically valuable.

Finally, it is important to call more attention to the 'dark side' of private schooling and affluent parenting, where students bear the burdens of high levels of pressure to perform academically from schools and parents, and intense competition

from ambitious peers, grounded in families that place significant emphasis on economic and social status (with academic achievement as a route to its attainment, as outlined in Chapter 7). The students in this study cooperated with school and parental agendas of academic achievement and elite university entrance to a significant extent, working 'in concert' with these actors. However, this research has also opened a fruitful avenue for future work that might find some spaces of rebelliousness amongst students vis a vis these intensifying agendas, and attempts to redefine what is most worth 'cultivating'.

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