Status Inequalities: A Study of the Impact of Socioeconomic Disparities on Educational Experience

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Status Inequalities: A Study of the Impact of Socioeconomic Disparities on Educational Experience

Morgan G. Johnstonbaugh

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Prerequisite for Honors in Sociology

April 2014

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the social, economic, and psychological factors that contribute to educational success. The analysis of 20 qualitative interviews with students at an elite liberal arts college highlights the complex relationship between socioeconomic status and education. Interviewees discuss the fields they encountered and the capital they accrued as they formed a habitus that was continuously being shaped by their experiences. These factors contributed to the trajectories that students followed as they developed high aspirations and continued on to university. A comprehensive analysis of this largely social process accentuates the inadequacies of educational policy that focuses on formal rather than informal processes of learning and education.
Acknowledgements

There are many people that have helped me through the rewarding and arduous task of writing an honors thesis. I would like to thank my advisor, Thomas Cushman, for his support, advice, and patience as I stumbled through bureaucratic barriers and decided that proper theoretical models had to be constructed on three or more sheets of paper. I would like to thank Professor Hartley Dean of the London School of Economics, whose lectures provided the inspiration for this thesis by encouraging my interest in education, socioeconomic status, and public policy. Likewise, I would like to thank all of the sociology faculty members of Wellesley College for their enthusiasm and guidance. Finally, I would like to thank my mom and dad for their support throughout my Wellesley experience as I encountered many challenges, celebrated victories, and roamed about Europe. Without their unwavering trust and guidance, I would not have been able to conquer the greatest challenge that is a Wellesley College Honors Thesis.
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Introduction

The American Dream is a defining element of the cultural ethos of the United States. From the first English settlers to today’s tech-savvy millennials, Americans have been thinking about how they are going to achieve economic success in the land of opportunity. Upon his arrival in 1831, Alexis de Tocqueville commented on the lack of class differences in the United States, distinct in many ways from European feudalism. He documented his observations writing, “Great equality existed among the emigrants who settled on the shores of New England. The germe of aristocracy was never planted in that part of the Union” (Tocqueville, 2007: 42). Instead of lords and ladies, the United States was made up of hardworking entrepreneurs, craftsman, and farmers, all trying to make a life for themselves in this new nation. In short, the United States was a place where hard work and determination paid off and the rags to riches fairytale became a symbolic element that remains “woven deep in the texture of the American cultural pattern” (Merton, 1968: 192).

The emphasis on economic opportunity and social mobility has also engrained an “achievement ideology” into American culture. Given the assumption that every American has access to equal economic opportunities, it follows that, “inequality is due to differences in ambition and ability” (Macleod, 2009: 3). Therefore, social class is viewed as an achieved status that can be attained through hard work, ambition, and access to education, an institution that serves as a source of opportunity for all (Macleod, 2009).

According to a poll conducted by Pew Charitable Trusts in 2009, Americans are optimistic about the opportunities available for economic mobility. For instance, when responding to the statement, “In the United States, a child's chances of achieving financial success is tied to the income of his or her parent” 29.8% of respondents completely disagreed
and 25.4% somewhat disagreed (“2009 Pew Economic Mobility Survey Project”, 2011). These statistics suggest that approximately 30% of respondents believe in the achievement ideology and 25% agree with it although they may have some reservations. As Figure One shows, the public continues to believe in the accessibility of social mobility, although this perception of opportunity does not match reality.

**Figure 1 - Americans’ Perception of Social Mobility**

![Figure 1: Americans’ Perception of Social Mobility](image)


Economic research suggests that social mobility is closely related to upbringing. For instance, Mazumder (2004) found that “sibling correlations in economic outcomes and human capital are larger than the correlations in a variety of other outcomes” including “physical attributes such as height and weight” (Mazumder, 2004: 4). It is expected that siblings share physical attributes and yet economic outcomes are even stronger, contradicting the belief that achievement is independent of upbringing. These surprising findings suggest that economic outcomes are correlated with family dynamics and are far from being an achieved status...
independent of family socioeconomic status. In contrast, it appears as though the “‘inheritance’ of economic inequality is particularly strong” (Mazumder, 2004: 33).

Research that has compared economic mobility in the United States to other countries also presents revealing statistics. An analysis of intergenerational mobility found that the United States has relatively low levels of mobility when compared to other countries. It is suggested that stickiness at the ends contributes to the lack of mobility because individuals born at the top and bottom of the income distribution experience considerably less mobility that those in the middle. For example, when looking at sons born to fathers in the bottom 10%, it is found that “22% of bottom decile sons remain in the bottom 10% as adults, and one-half remain in the bottom 30% (Corak, 2013: 6). These statistics suggest that it is very difficult for children from low-income families to attain social mobility. Corak (2013) continues on to determine if this stickiness is unique to the United States or if it is simply evidence of how social mobility works.

When looking specifically at social mobility between countries, comparing nations’ “intergenerational elasticity in earnings” produces unexpected results. Corak describes this measure as the “percentage difference in earnings in the child’s generation associated with the percentage difference in the parental generation” (Corak, 2013: 13). He then provides an example to clarify how to interpret the corresponding statistics:

For example, an intergenerational elasticity in earnings of .6 tells us that if one father makes 100% more than another then the son of the high income father will, as an adult, earn 60% more than the son of the relatively lower income father (Corak, 2013: 13).

A comparison of 21 different countries provides an astonishing revelation, as the United States is far from being the country with the highest social mobility. In fact, of the countries included, the United States ranks 15th. These findings suggest that Americans’ perception of economic mobility and opportunity in the United States is far from accurate as economic evidence shows
strong correlations between siblings as well as intergenerational mobility that are much lower than in other highly developed countries.

**Figure 2 - Ranking of Intergenerational Earnings Elasticity in 21 Countries**

![Intergenerational Earnings Elasticity Chart]

Note: Lightly shaded bars indicate countries that are not member states of the OECD, generally taken to mean lower income countries.

Source: Published estimates collected by the author and using the methods in Corak (2006).

Although many Americans still believe in the American Dream, economic statistics present evidence that questions the accuracy of the high levels of perceived economic opportunity and social mobility. This discrepancy may be explained by the socioeconomic disadvantages low-income individuals face including lack of transportation, specialized knowledge, and conditions for well-being. These challenges often limit individuals’ ability to
access quality education and employment, two variables that increase income and social mobility. Without the proper skills and training, it is extremely difficult to get a good job in today’s competitive labor market. Gone are the days when a high school diploma could lead directly to a 9 to 5 job, competitive salary, pension and benefits, and career from graduation to retirement. Today, workers compete in a credential society where they must attain advanced degrees in order to attain economic security (Collins, 1979). As a result of increasing competition due to credentialism, commercialization, and globalization, there are an increasing number of Americans who belong not to the working or middle-class but the “precariat,” a new social class that experiences decreased security and increased vulnerability (Standing, 2011; Brooks, 2014). The precariat includes individuals who are engaged in precarious work that is characterized by lack of job security, income-earning opportunities, skill-building opportunities, worker representation, and protection from unsociable hours (Standing, 2011: 10; Noah, 2012).

While educational opportunities are meant to increase social mobility and job security, policy measures have had limited success. College graduation rates highlight one factor that is preventing low-income individuals from increasing their earnings and income. When comparing college graduation rates for students from the top parental income quartile and the bottom income quartile over the past thirty years researchers have found that “graduation rates from the top income children rose from 36 to 54 percent, [and] at the bottom the increase in graduates was only from 5 to 9 percent” (Kenworthy and Smeeding, 2013: 32). Graduation rates exemplify the dramatic disparity in educational attainment between low and high-income students, experiencing rates of graduation rise 4 percentage points and 18 percentage points respectively. In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of how income influences educational attainment, it is necessary to identify the factors that contribute to Americans’ social class.
The various factors that contribute to social class can be examined by studying socioeconomic status (SES). It is a powerful concept because it incorporates an array of variables that are frequently correlated with income such as education level and occupational prestige (Schneider, 2011: 226). By combining multiple variables, socioeconomic status highlights the complex nature of social class and the ways in which variables interact with one another. Furthermore, studying the relationship between socioeconomic status and education will also require a thorough investigation of socioeconomic disadvantage.

An examination of the literature will provide a “more dynamic picture of the way social disadvantage operates” and highlight its true nature, “not as a fixed handicap which inhibits progress, but rather as a series of events that may intervene to check or undermine progress throughout the child’s education” (Smith and Noble, 1995: 32-33). The various facets of socioeconomic disadvantage may be separated and labeled as different “barriers to learning” (Smith and Noble, 1995). These barriers are often entangled and compounded upon one another and can be divided into three broad categories: physical, financial, and internal (Smith and Noble, 1995).

A belief in economic prosperity, opportunity, and mobility are deeply engrained in American culture. In a time of increasing inequality and decreasing mobility, policy reform may be needed to provide equal opportunity and promote educational success (Picketty and Saez, 2003). An analysis of one of the most comprehensive forms of education policy, inclusionary policy, will examine how policy design has attempted to counteract socioeconomic disadvantage.

The starting point for this thesis is that students rely on a wide range of resources to achieve educational success and many of these are not provided by current educational policy. I have explored this process in great detail by conducting qualitative interviews with 20 college
students at an elite liberal arts college which will be called *Sample College*. My interviewees all attended middle-class high schools and vary by race and socioeconomic status. This variation allowed me to gain a greater understanding of the challenges low-income students experience when they enter a high-income learning environment. A semi-structured interview schedule examined many education related subjects in order to learn about the people, environments, and opportunities that increased students’ abilities and aspirations, contributing to their trajectory towards a prestigious college.

A theoretical framework inspired by Pierre Bourdieu highlights the importance of the acquisition of capital through family, school, and extracurricular activities, and the influence that socioeconomic status plays in this process. Not surprisingly, I found that my interviewees’ educations were significantly influenced by two primary fields: home and school, as well as the social actors in said fields including parents, extended family, teachers, and peers. Interactions within these fields provided students with a wide range of social and cultural capital that was often a product of investments made by parents, teachers, and peers. While socioeconomic status contributed to a significant amount of variation, there were also a surprising number of similarities among my interviewees including friend characteristics, family values, and challenging coursework. These factors contributed to the development of an education-oriented habitus that is typical of students at *Sample College*. While my interviewees benefited from attending high-income schools, they also relied heavily on informal education and the accumulation of capital.
Chapter 1: Literature Review

The literature on education and education policy can be divided into two separate yet related fields. First, there is an abundance of research that documents and measures the barriers to education that students face as a consequence of socioeconomic disadvantage. Secondly, there is also extensive literature that investigates the policy responses to these barriers. The literature in these fields includes quantitative and qualitative data as well as numerous theoretical frameworks. Combining the literature from these fields will provide a thorough overview of the challenges related to socioeconomic disadvantage and policy responses that are prevalent in the American education system today.

Barriers to Educational Attainment

PHYSICAL BARRIERS

Low-income students face a wide-variety of physical barriers that impede educational success, illustrated by research that documents the strong relationship between health and education (Suhrcke and de Paz Nieves, 2011: 5). Variations in health may be attributed to genetics, environmental conditions, and characteristics related to socioeconomic status. Very broadly, low-income individuals often face many more obstacles to good health than their high-income counterparts including increased risk and exposure to chronic illness, “poor nutrition, less access to medical care, and more psychological stress” (Beam Dowd et al., 2009: 704-5; Schneider, 2011: 226). In order to understand how socioeconomic disadvantage affects health, I will concentrate on research studying three different aspects: diet, exercise, and access to medical care. While this is not an exhaustive list by any means, it will highlight three of the
major physical challenges that accompany socioeconomic disadvantage and influence educational attainment.

*Diet*

The United States has seen a dramatic rise in obesity rates over the past several decades. This trend is related to a combination of increasing consumption of processed foods as well as decreasing levels of physical activity. Unfortunately, declines in diet and exercise are two factors that disproportionately affect low-income children. Hastert et al. (2008) found that, “[a] greater proportion of low-income teens consume soda and fast food compared to teens from higher-income households” (Hastert et al., 2008: 2). These findings are supported by research that documents how “poverty affects food selection away from the nutritious food domains of dairy, fruits and vegetables to energy rich, nutrient depleted fats, starch and low nutrient content foods” (Karp et al., 2011: 147). This trend may be explained by the fact that foods containing fats and carbohydrates are often much cheaper and more accessible than the nutritious alternatives (Kenworthy and Smeeding, 2013: 58). Poor nutrition contributes to a wide variety of health concerns. Children may suffer from obesity, impaired cognitive development, suppressed immune function, and chronic illness, conditions that impede their academic success (Korenman et al., 1995: 148; Beam Dowd et al., 2009: 704-5).

*Exercise*

Another factor that increases the risk of obesity and poor health is lack of physical activity. Research suggests that “lower-income adolescents have fewer opportunities to participate in organized sports or physically active classes and lessons” (Hastert et al., 2008: 4). Activities at school often require many parental resources and when these resources are unavailable, students’ ability to participate is greatly diminished and they are unable to “reap the
health and fitness benefits that those activities provide” (Hastert et al., 2008: 4). Access to physical activity through organized sports may also be lessened when low-income children live in the suburbs because transportation is often necessary for traveling to and from activities (Schneider, 2011: 278). By combining the inaccessibility of organized sports and the lack of mobility in the suburbs, it is no surprise that low-income students aren’t getting enough exercise. Instead, it appears as though they are watching more television (Hastert et al., 2008: 4).

Medical Care

Another barrier to physical health is “variable access to medical care” because the utilization of medical care depends on several key factors including “financial, geographic and cultural accessibility” (Schneider, 2011: 227; Karp et al., 2011: 147). Access to medical care can be organized into a “medical home” model, which is built upon the idea that medical care is a complex process that relies on the availability of a plethora of resources. For instance, in order to provide their children with the best medical care, parents rely on crucial resources including access to health insurance and the financial resources to pay deductibles, copayments, and other related expenses (Schneider, 2011: 446). They must also have the transportation and time resources that are required to take their child to doctors’ appointments. Finally, parents must also have access to a “research rich network” that can provide them with information on specialists and health options (Karp et al., 2011: 147). Unfortunately, according to the 2012 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement (CPS ASEC), 7 million children in the United States did not have health insurance, suggesting that many parents struggle to provide adequate medical care (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2012: 26).
FINANCIAL BARRIERS

By definition, low-income students have limited access to financial resources and this can be seen indirectly through many of the barriers that they encounter. In cases of extreme poverty, parents are not able to provide the basic necessities their children need to survive such as food, clothing, and housing. While low-income parents may be able to provide their children with basic resources, they are rarely able to offer them the same resources as high-income parents. The disparity between low and high-income students is evident through students’ participation in activities and consumption, two areas that contribute to educational attainment.

*Extracurricular Activities*

Low-income students’ participation in extracurricular activities is often hindered by financial barriers because there are many fees associated with clubs, sports, and educational activities. In addition to upfront costs, there are also additional expenses that usually go unnoticed such as dues, transportation, and equipment. Even when low-income parents are willing to pay for activities, students are aware of their financial struggles and they exclude themselves from participating in order to prevent burdening their parents with more expenses (Adelman et al., 2011; Attree, 2006). Children may also look for alternative sources of financial support by asking relatives for help to finance activities or finding a part-time job. Based on low-income students’ tendency to exclude themselves from costly activities, it is not surprising that “opportunities for social participation, and feelings of social inclusion, may be reduced by the material constraints of poverty” (Attree, 2006: 60).
Consumption

Material disadvantage can also been seen through the purchase of goods and services. There are many goods that have social value and are frequently used to convey social status and stratify “status groups” based on their consumption (Weber, 1948: 193). Designer goods may be viewed as a viable method for accessing status groups and creating an “elevated social identity” which is evident in today’s consumer driven society (Matt, 2002: 19). This situation is especially applicable to high school students who are constantly trying to fit in and keep up with the last trends (Milner, 2004).

The struggle to own popular items may be labeled as students’ desire to keep up appearances which becomes increasingly important as students “move into adolescence and the social demands on them increase” (Attree, 2006: 63). Not surprisingly, owning and displaying status symbols is problematic for low-income students because they have access to fewer financial resources and it is well-known that “The preoccupation with fashionable clothes and other status symbols creates an acute need for money” (Milner, 2004: 57).

Unfortunately, one method for keeping up appearances is using credit cards to purchase status items. Reliance on credit is extremely dangerous for low-income students and parents because it is difficult to pay off credit card debt with limited income and high interest rates. While credit cards may provide a temporary sense of relief, they have powerful financial and psychological consequences including a “heavier psychological burden in the loss of a sense of freedom” (Parker, 1974: 9).

While the inability to purchase popular items may appear trivial, individuals experience real social and psychological consequences as a result. Consumption is a powerful tool that is used to project a “sense of self-worth within an unequal society” (Davidson et al., 2006: 2177).
In a culture focused on monetary success, students may experience feelings of failure, inferiority, and isolation when they are unable to purchase status goods (Davidson et al., 2006: 2177; Merton, 1968).

INTERNAL BARRIERS

The physical disadvantages created and perpetuated by socioeconomic disadvantage are often visible as is the lack of participation in activities and ownership of status items. It is more difficult to recognize the effects of socioeconomic disadvantage on cognitive and psychological development although these issues are no less important. For instance, research shows that psychological, cognitive and socioemotional disadvantages begin in early childhood and may be evident in deficits in “verbal memory, vocabulary, math and reading achievement and an index of behavior problems” (Korenman et al., 1995: 146). These variables are particularly important because they are developed very early on and are closely related to educational success. Students also internalize the external or physical barriers that they encounter, and this social process contributes to students’ failure to develop and succeed in the education system.

Cognitive Factors

Some research suggests that cognitive differences arise because “Children from more well-off homes tend to experience parental attitudes that are more sensitive, more encouraging, less intrusive and less detached — all of which, they found, serves to increase I.Q. and school-readiness” (Tough, 2006). Based on these findings, it is evident that cognitive development is influenced by parenting practices and may have serious repercussions on children’s educational experience and success (Hess and Holloway, 1984: 180). While there is evidence that documents discrepancies in vocabulary and attitudes in the home based on socioeconomic status, more frequently parents are not the only individuals influencing their children’s development. Because
many households are now composed of dual earners, children spend less time with parents and a considerable amount of time in daycare (Corak, 2013). Therefore, research suggests that differences are also influenced by “verbal deprivation” that actually takes place in daycare because “[w]orking class children tended to receive less verbal contact, stimulation and encouragement from staff than did the middle class children” (Smith and Noble, 1995: 31). This may be explained by low-income parents’ inability to afford high quality child care or their access to limited child care options because of where they live or the hours they work (Kenworthy, 2012). While it is clear that cognitive development is extremely important for education readiness, explanations for the disparities between low and high-income children are quite complex.

**Stress**

Low-income students also experience increased level of stress. Interestingly, while physical and material circumstances contribute to ill-health, the “psychosocial effects of deprivation” directly influence health and socioeconomic stress (Wilkinson, 1996: 176). This stress has serious physiological effects such as shrunken thymus glands, which are vital to immune health, and increased levels of stress hormones called glucocorticoids (Wilkinson, 1996: 176-8; 193-207). Socioeconomic disadvantage intensifies the level of stress that students experience because they share and often internalize their parents’ financial problems. For example, when parents experience economic hardship their children “embraced a sense that parents and children had some responsibility for their own and each other’s health” (Backett-Milburn et al., 2003: 620). While it is normal for students to “bring worries, concerns, and issues from home with them to school” it is important to recognize that “[s]ome of these anxieties are sure to affect their school experiences” (Lit, 2009: 35).
In fact, research suggests that “[a]nxiety and depression appear to be significantly and negatively associated with both short- and long-term educational outcomes” (Suhrcke and de Paz Nieves, 2011: 37). The relationship between depression and educational outcomes corresponds to similar findings as researchers report that, “depressive symptoms are significantly associated with the educational decisions” made by adolescent females including dropping out of high school and not enrolling in college (Fletcher, 2008: 1229). Additionally, if an individual’s mental illness goes untreated for an extended period of time, it is “significantly less likely to achieve remission” (Marshall et al., 2005). With decreased access to medical care and increased levels of socioeconomic stress, depression poses a significant threat to educational attainment and future well-being.

Social Factors

Finally, it is imperative to recognize that “the costs of poverty are not only material but also profoundly social” (Attree, 2006: 59). Although low-income students try to “maximise their resources” many experience a “gradual narrowing of their horizons, both socially and economically” (Attree, 2006: 54). A number of ethnographic studies produce very similar observations and suggest that it is not uncommon for low-income students to “relegate themselves out of the system” (Maton, 2008: 58-9; Macleod, 2009; Willis, 1977; Fordham, 1985). Students do this when they “read the future” and select the fate that appears to be the most likely for them by learning their “rightful place in the social world” (Maton, 2008: 58-9). Through this process, low-income students often perceive their “social and economic potential” as very limited (Attree, 2006: 62).

A prime example of this self-exclusion is presented by Fordham (1985) who documents how African American students’ perceptions of the limitations and opportunities available to
them influenced their educational attainment (Fordham, 1985: 26). One student, for instance, saw her “personal future as being very ‘small’” because of her race, her limited access to resources, and the competition in school (Fordham, 1986: 35-6). Similarly, Macleod was shocked when he discovered the low aspirations held by low-income students. He found that “[t]he world of middle-class work was entirely alien to them” as they aspired to working-class jobs that “did not even cut across class lines” (Macleod, 2009: 4). Students who experience socioeconomic disadvantage internalize the constraints that they encounter, negatively influencing their perceptions of the available opportunities.

A MODEL OF BARRIERS TO LEARNING RESULTING FROM SOCIOECONOMIC DISADVANTAGE

Documenting the barriers to learning that low-income students encounter provides the first piece of information that is needed to understand the relationship between socioeconomic status and education. The literature supports the claim that low-income students experience a wide array of structural barriers that greatly influence their educational attainment. Health is shaped by a variety of external and internal factors, many of which are influenced by socioeconomic status. Similarly, limited access to financial resources decreases students’ ability to participate in extracurricular activities and “keep up with appearances”. The physical and material challenges that low-income students experience also have social and psychological consequences. Low-income students often miss out in their early years as their cognitive development lags behind their high-income peers and psychological barriers may develop as a result of increased levels of stress and depression. Finally, the social aspect of socioeconomic disadvantage emphasizes the influence of constraint on developing attitudes and perceptions that lead to discounted aspirations.
The literature suggests that students who come from low-socioeconomic backgrounds encounter a greater number of barriers to learning than peers who come from high-income backgrounds. Students who experience greater socioeconomic disadvantage will meet barriers that may increase in both strength and number. Consequently, increasing barriers will lead to the increased risk of educational failure. This process is illustrated in Figure 3 on the next page.
Figure 3 - Barriers to Learning Resulting from Socioeconomic Disadvantage

- Educational Failure
- Time
- Access to Activities
- Stress & Anxiety
- Cognitive Development
- Nutrition

Student

Educational Success
Policy Response

There are many different strategies that policymakers have developed to provide low-income students with greater educational opportunities. However, these strategies are often limited as they almost always focus on the “formal processes of schooling” which can be characterized as the “inputs and outputs of education” such as: preschool programs, free and reduced lunch, mentoring programs, and increased school funding (Crosnoe, 2011: 37; Wight, 2006; Smith and Noble, 1995; Sparkes and Glennerster, 2002). Because the United States prides itself on the “achievement ideology,” many people, including policymakers, believe that educational opportunity can reduce socioeconomic disadvantage and increase social mobility. However, the economic statistics I presented in my introduction illustrate the limited economic mobility that is actually achieved in the United States as well as the disparity in continuing education based on income-level.

It appears as though the policies that are designed to promote equal educational opportunities for all students, have had very limited success for a variety of reasons. For example, one method for improving low-income students’ nutrition is the free and reduced lunch program. However, these meals are not fully utilized because eligible students may not be registered or those who are authorized do not take advantage of the program because of the inherent social stigma (Smith and Noble, 1995: 106). Similarly, the lack of medical care available to low-income students has been addressed by providing medical diagnostic services at school. While this may be an improvement, treatment is not provided, “leaving many children with health problems that are repeatedly diagnosed but untreated” (Schneider, 2011: 448). While policy makers have addressed some of the structural barriers that low-income students experience, many of the policies that have been implemented do not actually eliminate barriers.
Inclusionary strategies are explicitly designed to provide equal educational opportunities to low and high-income students through inclusionary housing or transportation to high-achieving schools districts. These programs have been created to “expand educational opportunities, increase diversity, and reduce racial isolation” (“Metco Program”, 1997). Students who rely on transport continue to live in the same homes and neighborhoods as they normally would while they travel to schools in other communities. Most commonly, students will travel from urban neighborhoods to suburban school systems.

In contrast, inclusionary housing enables “lower- and moderate income households to live in middle and upper-income communities” (Schwartz et al., 2012: XI). Inclusionary housing is similar to the transport program because it is also meant to “increase social inclusion and increase educational opportunities (Schwartz et al., 2012: 2). While research suggests that residents experience many benefits from living in a middle-class area such as less crime and increased opportunities for employment and education, there is less evidence supporting other social benefits (Schwartz et al., 2012: 10). A thorough analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of inclusionary policy will highlight how these policies fail to compensate for the socioeconomic disadvantages students face at home as well as the new challenges that arise from entering a high-income school system.

BENEFITS

Past research offers several different definitions for what constitutes a high-achieving school. Good schools are often identified by a strong reputation and setting high standards for teachers and students through high test scores on standardized exams and strong performance for college placement (Lit, 2009). Other factors that contribute to a high-achieving school include “access to plentiful resources” including materials, facilities, and personnel (Lit, 2009: 10).
Interestingly, the presence of strong school resources, structures, and practices corresponds with an equally important factor: social composition (Lit, 2009).

**Social Composition**

In addition to more resources (school effects), high-income schools also benefit students through the “middle-class peer effect” (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005: 2001). While students may benefit from the availability of more resources, these do not “account for the effects of school SES” nor do “school policies and practices” (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005: 2020-1). Researchers have discovered that academic achievement is linked not only to personal socioeconomic status but also to the “average social class backgrounds of all the students in their school” (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005: 2020). Astonishingly, it is suggested that the “[t]he social composition of the student body is more highly related to achievement, independent of the student’s own social background, than is any school factor” (Coleman et al., 1966: 325). One explanation for why the “middle-class peer effect” is so powerful is that middle-class parents demand more and have higher expectations of teachers and the education system (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005: 2021-2).

**Teachers**

Teacher quality also influences student attainment and success (Lit, 2009: 175). Research shows that good schools have more qualified teachers because teachers are less likely to quit or transfer than those placed in high poverty schools (Schwartz et al., 2012: 10). High-achieving schools in high-income areas can provide the features that attract qualified teachers including: “increased salary” as well as “class size, preparation time, facilities, student characteristics, and school leadership” (Boyd et al., 2005: 166). Good schools also benefit by attracting the best teachers and sustaining high rates of teacher retention because teachers
increase their effectiveness as they gain experience (Boyd et al., 2005: 166). By taking all of the resources that good schools provide for their students into account, it is hard to imagine that students do not thrive in such a resource rich environment. Unfortunately, there are a variety of social factors that may prevent students from achieving academic success even when they are placed in the best school systems.

CHALLENGES

Research suggests that there are many unknowns that accompany inclusionary policy measures and these may have a significant impact on educational success. While it is clear that low-income students benefit from living in a high-income neighborhood and attending a high-income school, these students may also encounter a number of new challenges. In order to better understand the challenges that may arise when entering a high-income school, it is vital to analyze the “informal processes of schooling” by focusing on the “social and psychological underpinnings of the system” (Crosnoe, 2011: 38). While it is apparent that attending a high-income school should have a positive impact on educational attainment, analysis of the informal process will allow for a more complex understanding of low-income students’ actual experiences.

Discrimination

Unfortunately, research shows that inclusionary policy may actually harm low-income students because they experience “additional stress, hardships, complications, and even marginalization” (Lit, 2009: 178). For instance, students and their families may experience discrimination or prejudice when interacting with neighbors and peers when they move into a high-income area (Schwartz et al., 2012: 10). Students may feel marginalized when current residents react negatively to their presence because they do not want to “give up or share their
privileged position” (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005: 2022). Low-income students may also encounter “within-school segregation in learning opportunities and friendship patterns” (Rumberger and Palardy, 2005: 2022). When students experience discrimination and segregation in their new schools, they internalize these experiences, increasing marginalization and decreasing social cohesion.

Based on the contentious relationship that may be formed between high-income and low-income residents, it is not surprising that a division is formed and low-income students perceive the “imagined middle-class residents” as “callous and indifferent to the plight of the poor” (Weinger, 2000: 142). Students may develop an “undercurrent of resentment,” suggesting that “children internalise the divisions caused by intense income inequalities that undermine common bonds, familiar connections, and mutual understanding among people” (Weinger, 2000: 146). High levels of inequality appear to impede social cohesion as high-income residents oppose inclusionary policy and low-income residents develop feelings of isolation and resentment (Wilkinson, 1996). It is clear that experiences of discrimination and segregation are internalized and have serious consequences as low-income students develop feelings of isolation and resentment as social cohesion diminishes.

**Parenting Practices**

Low-income students are also separated from their high-income peers as there is a significant difference in the child-rearing practices used in high and low-income households. Lareau (1987) finds that middle-class parents often “engage in a pattern of concerted cultivation [and] deliberately try to stimulate their children’s development and foster their cognitive and social skills” (Lareau, 1987: 5). Concerted cultivation is apparent in the type and number of middle-class students’ activities as they are often “enrolled in formal socialization activities,
including swimming lessons, soccer, art and crafts lessons, karate lessons, and gymnastics” (Lareau, 1987: 81). In contrast, low-income parents often engage in natural growth parenting which can be seen in students’ informal activities that may include “bike riding, snake hunting, watching television, playing with neighbor children, and helping parents with younger siblings” (Lareau, 1987: 81).

The divide between high and low-income parenting practices is also evident when children are still very young and middle-class parents actively purchase supplies to assist their children’s development through concerted cultivation. Lareau describes the stark contrast as she remarks, “[m]iddle-class homes typically have a nearly inexhaustible supply of paper, crayons, markers, stickers, and assorted other craft supplies for children’s use” while observations in a low-income household found no supplies, “The family does not own a ruler or marking pens. Paper of any kind is in short supply” (Lareau, 1987: 101). This discrepancy in material resources becomes even more apparent when low-income students enter high-income educational environments.

Finally, unlike middle-class parents who are actively shaping their children’s education, low-income parents are usually much less involved in the educational process. The difference in parents’ participation may be explained by a wide variety of factors including “parents' educational, capabilities, their view of the appropriate division of labor between teachers and parents, the information they had about their children's schooling, and the time, money, and other material resources available in the home” (Lareau, 1987: 79; Crosnoe, 2011: 68).

This discrepancy is significant because highly involved parents work closely with teachers to make sure that their children are excelling in school. When students are not performing, high-income parents use their financial and social resources to find a solution.
Students also benefit when their parents are able to help them navigate through the education system and understand the curriculum so that they make well-informed decisions (Crosnoe, 2011: 68). While high-income parents have access to a wide array of resources to give their children the education they need, low-income parents’ interaction with the educational system may be restricted because “[a]ccess to these resources requires the navigation of a complex series of challenges” (Lit, 2009: 10). Interestingly, students may also perceive parental differences through the actual “presence of parents in the classroom” (Lit, 2009: 42). Middle-class stay-at-home parents are frequently involved in school activities. While it is beneficial to have parents available to help in school, their presence may actually increase the sense of distance and isolation felt by low-income students whose parents are not able to participate (Lit, 2009). Therefore, parents’ involvement in the school may influence students’ access to resources as well as their social experience of inclusion or isolation.

The Consumption Cleavage

There is a significant relationship between teenagers and consumerism, and the role that consumerism plays in developing status groups and privilege in high school (Milner, 2004). Consumption influences inclusionary policy because it often depends on social context as status items are based on current trends and students’ access to financial resources. Interestingly, goods that were once viewed as status items may lose their “value as a positive status symbol” when they become common within the student body and “not having one could cause you to be looked down upon” (Milner, 2004: 53).

A consumption cleavage may occur in a student body based on “different patterns of consumption of goods and services” (Johnson, 2000: 60). A very powerful feature of social life, it “shapes people’s identities, divides one group from another, and shapes their life changes or
behaviour” (Johnson, 2000: 60). Students at a high-income school may possess a wide array of items that articulate their social standing and are even viewed as required goods. When low-income students fail to present these items, a division may form between low and high-income students. Further, low-income students in high-income environments may experience consumption cleavages in other areas of life as well. Not only are their belongings and material resources greatly limited, their activities are also constrained by limited financial resources.

When low-income students attend high-income schools, it is quickly apparent that their parents have fewer resources. Financial disadvantage may prevent students from taking full advantage of educational opportunities and students may experience feelings of social isolation and constraint. Empirical evidence supports the trends highlighted by Lareau and suggests that there is a “growing class gap in enrichment expenditures on children” (Mumane and Duncan, 2011). Activities are important because they promote social inclusion, give students tools and skills to aid their development, encourage success inside the classroom, and prepare students for the college application process. It is unfortunate that access to activities is so constrained for low-income students because participation in school activities is exactly what is needed to “foster the school community” and reduce social differences (Akerlof and Kranton, 2002: 1192).

A MODEL OF ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF INCLUSIONARY EDUCATIONAL POLICIES

The literature suggests that the policy strategies designed to improve educational opportunities increase both advantages and disadvantages for low-income students. While policies have been instituted to combat barriers to learning discussed in the previous section, these strategies often fail to address the root cause of the problem. Inclusionary policy is a comprehensive policy measure that was designed to increase educational opportunities for
underserved populations. Figure 4 represents the advantages and disadvantages that arise from inclusionary policy. While inclusionary policy does offer students benefits, they also encounter many new problems in high-income educational environments. In theory, a good school allows students to follow a trajectory towards educational success. Unfortunately, the new challenges students face may lower their trajectory, creating a dynamic process that moves students between two trajectories.
CONCLUSION

The literature suggests that there are a variety of social factors that affect low-income students in high-income educational environments. While middle-class students “may take for granted their ‘right’ to be involved in various activities” low-income students develop an “emerging sense of constraint in their interactions in institutional settings” (Lareau, 1987: 60; 6-7). This sense of constraint may be caused by low-income students becoming “acutely aware of the goods and privileges they lack” (Davidson et al., 2006: 2178-2180). Consequently, students may also develop a sense of powerlessness, frustration, and being unheard and ignored through their interactions with the school system (Lareau, 1987; Davidson et al., 2006). These feelings contribute to a common “theme of ‘knowing your place’” specific to low-income students (Davidson et al., 2006: 2178-2180). Feelings of constraint and powerlessness are evident in Crosnoe’s observation that low-income students perceive isolation or rejection when they feel “they don’t measure up socially in their high schools” (Crosnoe, 2011: 85). Students’ perception of opportunities and constraints as well as their relative position to others students, are powerful social forces that can influence educational outcomes. While these “Informal processes are easier to dismiss,” that does not mean that they are not important (Crosnoe, 2011: 45). It is clear that social processes play a major role in influencing students’ educational experience.

By analyzing the formal and informal processes of education, it is apparent that successful educational policy must address the complex nature of all schooling in order to equalize opportunities for all students. Policy strategies must recognize the challenges that are caused by structural barriers and threaten students’ abilities to achieve educational attainment. One way to better understand formal and informal education is to analyze education through a theoretical framework that documents the internalization of social factors that contribute to education.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Field, Capital, and Habitus

The theoretical framework of my research study is largely built upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu and more specifically, his “[i]nter-dependent and co-constructed trio – field, capital and habitus” (Thomson, 2008: 69). Bourdieu’s work is particularly useful because his concepts contribute to a larger framework for understanding the “complex interactions between structure and agency” and offer a unique insight into the process of social reproduction (MacLeod, 2009: 459). In order to use these concepts properly, it is vital to understand that no one concept is dominant or causal because each one is “integral to understanding the social world, and the three [are] tangled together in a Gordian knot” (Thomson, 2008: 69). In the following section, I use Bourdieu’s concepts to build a theoretical model that analyzes the social factors and processes that contribute to educational trajectories and consequently lead to success or failure.

FIELD

A field is the social space in which social interactions and events take place (Thomson, 2008: 67-9). Fields may be physical spaces as well as durable institutions such as family or school, and they are often considered to be analogous with a sports field as they can be described as a “boundaried site where a game is played” (Lizardo, 2004: 376; Thomson, 2008: 68-9). Building off of this analogy, social actors in the field are labeled as players who have set positions and must learn the rules and skills required to play the game in order to acquire capital. The rules and skills vary by field and social actors may be more or less prepared to play the game depending on their prior fields, positions, and skills. While people have no choice in the
first field they enter, their family, they often select future fields and positions that complement their current field (Maton, 2008: 59).

In this thesis, I will analyze two influential fields: home and school. Individuals learn roles in both of these sites as well as important rules and skills. Oftentimes students will learn many of the skills they need for educational success in the home from parents, siblings, and relatives. Students also learn these in school when they interact with peers, teachers, and administrators. Interestingly, the rules and skills learned in the home do not always match those required or preferred at school. This discrepancy may be caused by a gap between family socioeconomic status and the social composition of the school. The accumulation of capital is another social factor that will contribute to this difference and distinguish low and high-income players.

CAPITAL

Bourdieu distinguishes between four different types of capital: economic, cultural, social, and symbolic (Thomson, 2008: 69). Economic capital is the only physically tangible form of capital and includes financial and material resources. In contrast, cultural capital consists of knowledge and taste as well as many cultural resources such as “informal cultural knowledge of the higher education system” and “dispositions to intervene in schooling” which may “become forms of cultural capital” (Lareau and Weininger, 2008: 120). Social capital includes connections and networks, cultural heritage, and “forms of capital and [that] can be ‘exchanged’ in other fields” (Thomson, 2008: 69). It is important to note that all forms of capital require the appropriate investment and this often provides a valuable return (Moore, 2004: 446).

With the introduction of different forms of capital, Bourdieu adds greater complexity to socioeconomic status (Crossley, 2008: 88). Instead of simply relying on economic capital, he
suggests that individuals have an “objective position in social space in virtue of their portfolio of economic and cultural capital” (Crossley, 2008: 88-9). This portfolio contains different types of acquired capital that vary by volume and composition (Crossley, 2008).

Parents pass on many different types, forms, and amounts of capital to their children. The most explicit being economic capital, which can be employed when parents use their financial resources to provide their children with opportunities. Cultural capital may also be seen when parents teach their children different forms of knowledge and pass on their own tastes and dispositions. Finally, social capital is utilized when parents share their social networks with their children, giving them access to a diverse array of connections that may benefit them throughout the educational process.

The forms and amounts of capital that parents are able to pass on to their children vary dramatically by socioeconomic status. Parents’ level of education, occupational prestige, and income level generally influence the capital that they can access. Students also gain capital in school when teachers provide them with cultural knowledge and access to social networks. However, accessing capital at school may also require cultural capital. While the capital acquired at school is valuable, it is difficult to determine if it is accessible and can compensate for lack of capital acquisition at home. Students’ development of a unique portfolio of capital will also contribute to the shaping of their habitus.

HABITUS

The concept habitus was developed by Bourdieu in order to understand “how social structures and individual agency can be reconciled” and conceptualize how “social facts become internalized” (Maton, 2008: 50; 53). He suggests that the internalization of the outer depends on a “protracted process of conditioning” that often leads individuals to ‘read’ the future and learn
“where we will do best given our dispositions and resources, and also where we will struggle” (Maton, 2008: 58-9).

The habitus is composed of individual experiences and history as well as the “whole collective history of family and class that the individual is a member of” (Reay, 2004: 434; MacLeod, 2009: 459). While habitus is shaped by family and life history, it is vital to understand that habitus is also permeable and responsive because it is “shaped by ongoing contexts” and is continually being re-structured (Maton, 2008: 59; Di Maggio, 1979; Reay, 2004: 434). Therefore, habitus is capable of adapting “in response to changing field position and changing field structures” and new forms of capital are continuously becoming embodied in the ever changing habitus (Hardy, 2008: 132; Moore, 2008: 105; Crossley, 2008: 95). Through this process, “Current circumstances are not just there to be acted upon, but are internalized and become yet another layer to add to those from earlier socializations” (Reay, 2004: 434). It is evident, that the ongoing formation and ongoing adaptation of the habitus is an extremely complex process. It is the dynamic nature of habitus that makes it such a useful concept (Maton, 2008: 63).

Although habitus is extremely complicated and frequently misunderstood, it is an invaluable concept because it provides a structure to analyze how individuals internalize the external world. Constraints and opportunities shape the individual’s perception of their place in the social world and this influences their gravitation towards certain fields (Reay, 2004: 433). Family and school are two fields that greatly influence students’ development of habitus as well as the capital that students acquire in these fields. The habitus will be built upon the student’s experiences, and it will contribute to their perceptions, aspirations, and trajectories towards educational success or failure.
A MODEL OF THE INTERACTION OF THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

Figure 5 illustrates the interaction between the three concepts that provide the foundation for my theoretical framework: field, capital, and habitus. Because these concepts are constantly interacting with one another throughout the education process, it is impossible to illustrate a causal relationship. However, it appears as though the new disadvantages low-income students experience in affluent educational fields are caused by disparities in capital and habitus. These disparities are most likely caused by the opportunities, resources, and social actors that students encounter in previous fields, primarily the family.

Figure 5 - Interaction of the Internal and External

- **Student**
- **Field**
  - learn position, rules, and skills
- **Capital**
  - portfolio composed of various types, forms, and volumes of capital
- **Habitus**
  - personal experiences
  - collective histories
  - attitudes & perceptions
Conformity and Rejection

When children begin their education, they enter a new field that may be very similar or very different from the field in which they grew up. The difference is most apparent when students enter a school and the social composition varies dramatically from that of their families based on race and/or socioeconomic status. While race is a powerful and important variable, I will focus specifically on the differences that appear when low-income students enter high-income learning environments. Low-income students respond to their new field by either conforming to or rejecting the school’s norms and expectations based on their previous field, portfolio of capital, and development of habitus.

CONFORMITY

Students conform to educational norms when they “maintain a standard set by” the school through a “voluntary imitation of prevalent modes of action” (Cooley, 1902: 262). This may be a relatively passive process that occurs when students simply try to “keep up rather than to excel” so that they can avoid the “pains and inconveniences of non-conformity” (Cooley, 1902: 262). Although the acceptance of academic norms encourages performing well in school, it does not assure educational success.

Methods of Conformity

While students may outwardly conform to the school’s norms, it is vital to determine if they also accept the school’s norms internally. The internal acceptance of norms requires internalization, “[a] process through which we come to identify parts of our culture as parts of ourselves, especially in relation to ideas such as values and norms that guide decisions about appearance and behaviour” (Johnson, 2000: 160). Some students may undergo resocialization by
“learning and, sometimes, the unlearning of various roles” if they encounter new norms at school (Johnson, 2000: 260). Therefore, if the norms at home do not match the norms at school, the student must undergo resocialization if they are to internalize and conform to the norms accepted at school.

A more dramatic form of conformity may be defined as “hero-worship”. Hero-worship differs from conformity because it involves “emulation that strives to imitate some admired character, in spirit… of loyal enthusiasm” (Cooley, 1902: 278). Students may try to emulate high-income students because there is often an “idealization of the higher strata and some aspiration on the part of those in low places to move to higher ones” (Goffman, 1990: 45). Interestingly, it is suggested that “hero-worship” is particularly influential for students because they are in the “plastic period of youth” (Cooley, 1902: 278). Conformity to educational norms signifies a field-habitus match, where the student’s habitus aligns with the field and accepts the rules and norms of the field (Maton, 2008: 59).

REJECTION

If students experience a “culture clash” or feel as though the school threatens their “self-image” they may reject the school’s norms and exert lower levels of effort (Akerlof and Kranton, 2002). The rejection of educational norms is documented by Fordham (1985) who argues that African American students “experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance around the issue of academic excellence in the school context” (Fordham, 1985: 4). She suggests that low levels of educational attainment illustrate how students adapt to their perception of having “limited social and economic opportunities” (Fordham, 1985: 6). There are a variety of methods of rejection that students may pursue in order to protect themselves if they feel their “self-image” is in jeopardy or the available opportunities do not warrant the required effort.
Methods of Rejection

Students may choose to protect their social self by withdrawing. Withdrawal is harmful when an individual uses it to escape “from the suggestions that agitate and harass it” (Cooley, 1902: 219). There are two types of withdrawal, mental and physical. Cooley describes mental withdrawal as a “subtler kind of withdrawal [that] takes place in the imagination alone by curtailing ambition, by trimming down one’s idea of himself to a measure that need not fear further diminution” (Cooley, 1902: 220). Crosnoe suggests that mental withdrawal depends on students’ perception of themselves in the “context of the student body of their schools” and those “who view themselves as not up to the academic challenges of school downgrade their aspirations, devalue such success, and lower their effort” (Crosnoe, 2011: 85). While physical withdrawal may be easily documented by recording information such as truancy rates, mental withdrawal is difficult to identify. In addition to withdrawing, students may also participate in active forms of deviance and opposition.

Students may decide to reject accepted norms and pursue non-conformity through a “rebellious impulse” and “spirit of opposition” (Cooley, 1902: 267). Students may be motivated to pursue a “spirit of opposition” because they:

Take pleasure in that enhanced feeling of self that comes from consciously not doing that which is suggested or enjoined upon them by circumstances and by other persons. There is joy in the sense of self-assertion… and if others are against him one feels sure they are his own (Cooley, 1902: 267)

In an environment where they feel threatened or marginalized, students will be drawn to behavior and actions that allow them to assert themselves. Students can engage in self-assertion by joining a subgroup or deviant group.
Subgroups and subcultures may be understood through “fictive kinship” and the “shared oppressive conditions” that bring students together (Fordham, 1985: 14). Lit (2009) documents similar tendencies as students tend to have “friends with whom one shares common and significant experiences” (Lit, 2009: 67). Subgroups are especially relevant to inclusionary policy because students may “retain many of the attitudes and experiences they encountered” in previous fields and find friends who share these experiences (Schwartz et al., 2012: 10). A subculture may also be built upon broader class differences as Willis (1977) finds that counter-school culture styles and skills rely upon the “larger pattern of working-class culture” (Willis, 1977: 52). The formation of subgroups is dangerous because fractionalization can contribute to students’ increased feelings of isolation and resentment toward the larger school culture, increasing the risk of educational failure (Wilkinson, 1996).

Organized deviant groups may also form and members are usually united through their deviance which “gives them a sense of common fate” (Becker, 1973: 38-9). Merton (1968) suggests that deviant behavior may be better understood by analyzing “the social interaction among these likeminded deviants who mutually reinforce their deviant attitudes and behavior which, in the theory, result from the more or less common situation they find themselves” (Merton, 1968: 232-3). When studying organized deviant groups, one may see “patterns of isolation and self-segregation” as protection from “conventional society” (Becker, 1973: 95-6). These methods of rejection signify the measures taken by students to protect their habitus during an instance of field-habitus clash or hysteresis (Maton, 2008; Hardy, 2008). Students may consciously or unconsciously sense that their habitus does not align with the norms, expectations, and structures of the field in which they are in and subsequently reject it (Maton, 2008; Hardy, 2008).
A MODEL OF THE DYNAMIC PATHS OF CONFORMITY AND REJECTION

Figure 6 illustrates the different trajectories that low-income students may follow when they attend a high-income school. Low-income students are more likely to grow up in low-income fields and experience deficits in capital that become apparent when entering an affluent educational field. Their habitus may also fail to align with the norms and expectations in the new educational field. These discrepancies may lead to a field-habitus clash, rejection of school norms, and consequently educational failure (Fig. 6 - Trajectory D). This process is unique to low-income students because their high-income peers are often raised with norms and expectations that are very similar to those that they encounter in school. Therefore, high-income students have accumulated the appropriate amounts and forms of capital and their habitus has been developed to match the dispositions and norms they encounter in school, causing a field-habitus match (Fig. 6 - Trajectory A).

The concepts of conformity and rejection are complex and students’ interactions with them will be dynamic because students’ identities are never static. Therefore, low-income students may experience a “cycle of disbelief-to-belief” moving between conviction, insecure aspiration, and cynicism (Goffman, 1990: 31). Students may also encounter events that cause them to shift towards conformity or rejection. While differences between the extremes of conformity and rejection are clear, the space between these two trajectories is difficult to define as there is “No definite line between conformity and non-conformity” (Cooley, 1902: 271). Trajectories B and C represent this complex process, illustrating changes in conformity and rejection that may occur when a low-income student enters a high-income educational environment.
HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

This thesis explores the hypothesis that low-income students must rely on a wide range of informal social resources in order to attain educational success. During the process of primary socialization, a child inhabits a field, gains capital, and develops a habitus. In a high-income field, children gain a wide variety of capital and develop a habitus that is well-suited for school, placing them on a trajectory towards educational success.

In contrast, children who inhabit a low-income field do not have access to the same types and levels of capital and this discrepancy may lead to the development of a habitus that is not prepared for educational success. Ill-prepared students will face many social and academic challenges and they may protect themselves by rejecting the school’s norms and withdrawing from the field by adhering to the norms of a subculture or deviant group, leading to educational failure.

Students who inhabit a low-income field may also be prepared for entering the educational field, as their parents use the resources available to prepare them as best they can. Students make up for their lack of resources by accumulating capital in the school through their interactions with teachers and peers. While these students face challenges, the support that they receive at home and at school helps to compensate for the constraints they experience. Therefore, informal resources and access to knowledgeable social actors help low-income students follow high trajectories and attain educational success. An analysis of this trajectory will expose the processes that contribute to low-income students’ success in high-income educational environments.
Chapter 3: Methodology

PARTICIPANTS

I interviewed 20 students who are currently attending an elite liberal arts college in the Northeast region of the United States. I will refer to the college as Sample College in order to protect the anonymity of the participants. After completing a thorough examination of the literature on educational experience, I concluded that the most pronounced individual variables that influence education include socioeconomic status, gender, race, and age. Based on this information, I decided to hold age constant by interviewing students who are currently in college and one recent graduate so that all of my respondents were between the ages of 18-23. I also decided to hold gender constant by interviewing only female students in order to highlight the unique experiences of young women. The education of women is a constantly evolving topic and it is vital to understand the challenges and benefits they encounter during the educational process (Bettie, 2013).

The two variables that I choose to incorporate in my study are race and socioeconomic status. I did this in order to record the experiences of a diverse group of students and study the influence of socioeconomic status and racial identities on educational experience. I also felt as though it was important to understand the interaction between race and socioeconomic status.

In addition to individual characteristics, there are many different external variables that influence a student’s educational experience. I choose to focus on the socioeconomic composition of educational environments in order to illustrate the social, economic, and material factors that are important for educational success in addition to attending a high-income school. Some respondents attended multiple schools during their K-12 education and therefore several different environments contributed to their educational experience. These interviews were
extremely helpful because students were able to reflect on the different schools they attended and the similarities and differences between them.

PROCEDURE

I began the research process by creating an advertisement for my research study. I included a brief description of my study, my contact information, and notification that monetary compensation would be awarded to all interviewees. I posted this advertisement on class Google groups that would allow all students to access them. Posting a general email announcement gave students the freedom to contact me if they were interested in participating in my study.

After students contacted me, I sent them a brief survey to complete and return to me (see Appendix One). Once students answered the survey questions, I selected interviewees based on the answers they provided. This was done in order to guarantee that a variety of different levels of socioeconomic status and races would be represented in my sample. I immediately eliminated respondents if they did not attend a middle or upper-middle class high school. In order to test my hypothesis properly it was vital that all my respondents received a similar education at least for part of their education.

Because of the small scale of this research project, I selected respondents strategically based on their race and socioeconomic status and thus created a stratified non-random sample. First, I selected respondents that represented five broad racial categories: White, Black, Asian, Hispanic, and Mixed. Then, I selected respondents that represented roughly 3 socioeconomic categories: Upper/upper-middle, middle, lower-middle/lower class. I oversampled from the lower-middle/lower class because this is the population that I am most interested in learning about. While selecting my sample, I also attempted to find students of different racial groups
with different socioeconomic statuses. This allowed me to analyze how these variables interacted with one another.

**Figure 7- Table of Interviewee Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>African American</th>
<th>Hispanic</th>
<th>Asian</th>
<th>Mixed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Upper/Upper-Middle</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to include students from the specified racial groups and social classes, I included five students who attended private school. Given that all of my respondents attended middle-class high schools I decided that accessing all racial and socioeconomic statuses was more important than limiting my variability to the type of schooling students had access. Additionally, no one in my sample attended private school for their entire K-12 education so they also provided a greater depth of perspective on educational experiences and methods they used to access educational opportunities.

Based on the factors that I choose to include in my research, it is clear that my sample is extremely diverse, which readers may criticize as a weakness. These concerns are mitigated to some extent by noting two critical aspects of my sample and the interviews I conducted. While constructing my sample, I selected several individuals from lower-middle and low-income backgrounds to represent each racial identity. I did this so that I would not be basing my analysis on one particular person’s perspective or experience. I then attempted to find at least two students to provide the middle or upper-class experience for each racial identity. While this was
not always possible based on the population I was accessing, all analysis is supported by data provided by multiple interviewees who come from similar backgrounds.

Additionally, the wide variety of interviews I have collected also strengthens the analysis I have been able to conduct. I am able to confidently illustrate the challenges of socioeconomic disadvantage that are constant among different racial groups as well as the ways in which socioeconomic status interacts with race. This provides a more comprehensive analysis of socioeconomic status and educational experience by highlighting the key challenges and benefits that this diverse group of students has experienced.

After I selected my respondents, we set up a date and time to meet in a quiet common space on the Sample College campus. These spaces where selected in order to make respondents feel safe and relaxed so that they would be willing to speak honestly about their educational experience. I also attempted to regulate my behavior by maintaining a positive disposition and acting as an interested and attentive audience. Because I am the same age and gender as my respondents, I believe I collected sincere answers as my respondents felt comfortable speaking with me. I suspect that respondents would feel more uncomfortable with a stranger or person of authority. It is my view that the characteristics we shared allowed for greater honesty and better data.

In return for participating in the interview, respondents received a gift card. The gift card was a small sum of money used to improve response rates and gain access to a large segment of the student population. In order to protect participants’ well-being, they were not required to complete the interview in order to receive the gift card. I completed this process three times, in the fall semester, winter break, and spring semester.
INTERVIEWS

Prior to beginning my interviews, I provided all interviewees with a brief description of my research interests. I also had every interviewee sign a consent form which informed respondents that I would not record any personal information, they were able to leave the interview at any time, and that they were encouraged to speak as freely and as openly as possible. I also verbally requested that I audio-record our conversation so that I was able to create a transcription after the interviews were completed. Interviews lasted approximately one hour to one and a half hours.

My interviews relied on a semi-structured format that consisted of a basic interview schedule (see Appendix). The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for respondents to extrapolate on topics that were particularly relevant to their experience. The interview schedule was divided into 6 different yet interrelated parts: family, friends, school, extracurricular activities, college preparation, and aspirations. As I collected interviews I adapted my interview schedule in order to improve the flow of my interviews and ensure that my interviewees understood my questions and were able to express their experiences accurately.

LIMITATIONS

This study was limited by the number of interviews that I was able to conduct. It would be beneficial to collect more interviews in order to increase the explanatory power of my observations. I was also limited by the small population from which I was drawing my respondents. The vast majority of respondents had parents who had received bachelors and often graduate degrees. Similarly, students of color were often first generation Americans as I drew from a population that has few students of color whose families had lived in the U.S. for multiple generations.
Chapter 4: Analysis

My interviewees provided me with a wealth of data that illustrates the influence of socioeconomic status on family, school, extracurricular activities, and aspirations. While my interviewees vary by socioeconomic status and race, the experiences that they shared with me reveal several illuminating patterns that define the trajectories they followed to educational success. Their experiences at high-income schools allowed them to access capital that contributed to the development of a habitus disposed to attaining a high level of educational achievement. I will begin my analysis at the primary stage of socialization, the family, and then proceed in a roughly chronological order analyzing coursework, teachers, peers, and activities. I will conclude my analysis by highlighting my interviewees’ preparation for continuing their education after high school and alternative paths.

FAMILY

The development of habitus begins in the home where children experience primary socialization. Parents knowingly and often unknowingly endow their children with different forms and levels of capital and this capital is compiled into a child’s portfolio which contributes to their developing habitus. Parenting can also influence the habitus by instilling values and setting implicit and explicit expectations. When I asked my interviewees about their families, they frequently commented on the educational values and expectations their parents and families had taught them. A thorough investigation of the family allows for a better understanding of how “[t]he habitus acquired in the family is at the basis of the structuring of school experiences” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992: 134).
Values

My interviewees frequently talked about how their parents taught them values that promoted a love for learning and other capital building activities. While the content of these values varied by socioeconomic status, they often centered on education and other forms of cultural capital. For instance, Jenny comments on her mother’s efforts to promote educational success although she herself had not completed higher education:

She was always very supportive—she tried really hard to make sure that I loved school. So at a young age whenever I did well in school, she would really reward me with things like that. She didn’t necessarily help me with homework but she was always very supportive and I know when it came to like middle school and high school she didn’t really know much to help me. It was more of like she was a support person like I could tell her about what happened and she would be like ‘yes, great job’ kind of thing.

While Jenny’s mother was not able to help her with homework and other activities related specifically to academics, she did her best to instill positive values and provide support that encouraged Jenny to excel in school. The support that Jenny’s mother provided helped Jenny develop a strong education oriented habitus by building up Jenny’s positive disposition toward school through continuous encouragement.

Another method parents used to instill educational values in their children was through activities such as reading. This method was used by most parents even when they had few economic resources to spare. Julia recalls how her mother placed a focus on reading and marvels at the generosity she exhibited:

I remember every day, before bed, she would read to us, granted it was like Spanish books but she would read to us every single day too. I remember we also owned this huge library in my house. She would spend all this money on buying brand new books. Julia’s mother dedicated significant financial and time resources to assure that her children were exposed to reading. She continued to help them purchase books even when she herself could no
longer select or even read them because of language barriers. Although she had very little education herself, Julia’s mother tried to give her children valuable cultural capital and build a habitus that enjoyed reading and could use this skill to excel in school. Sarah also discussed her love for reading and how it was passed down by her mother:

[Reading] came easily to me, it was an activity that I liked to do. You know my parents—my mom didn’t want me to watch a lot of television so I would either do arts and crafts or reading. I mean my parents, well my mom, would read bedtime stories at night. And she is an avid reader too so she was always reading.

Although Sarah’s mother worked full-time, she made sure that Sarah had access to stimulating activities. She also encouraged reading explicitly by reading bedtime stories with Julia and implicitly by frequently engaging in reading herself. As a result, Sarah also became a strong reader which benefited her educational experience. A strong reading ability contributed to Julia’s portfolio of capital as a crucial skill and to a habitus that was geared towards education. It is clear that these parents used the resources they had access to in order to pass on values that they believed would benefit their children and promote educational success.

While immediate family was usually recognized as the primary cultivator of values, sometimes the entire family would become involved in the promotion of education. Lauren reflects on her unique family experience:

I think what my mom really did and what the rest of the family really did was every time—education was fun and it was seen as a method of success and achievement. So whenever you graduated, if you did a really good job on a project, or anything it was acknowledged. If you won an award, it was dinner or you know everyone in the family knew and they’d call you, ‘I heard, you know how to do long division now.’ So education became a thing I loved doing, it’s interesting and intriguing but at the same time I loved that--it makes you feel good.

Lauren’s family was extremely involved in her education as they were frequently recognizing her academic accomplishments. This positive support helped to instill educational values deep
within her habitus as these were strengthened with each call and family dinner. However, this focus on education was far from unanimous among interviewees and it appeared to depend greatly on family socioeconomic status. For instance, Grace tells a very different story of how she interacted with her extended family. While her parents highly valued education and even pursued advanced degrees later on in life, her other family members did not share these values. When thinking back to family events, she recounts:

Not a lot of cousins who really pursued higher levels, like white collar jobs... I do remember kind of being the black sheep of my family when I was younger all focused on education because I didn’t play a sport. That was a big deal, basketball players, they always got the attention, any cousin that was athletic and you know, scholarship and they wouldn’t focus on me because I wanted to do science. So I do remember that and because a lot of—family members don’t share those values, my father said ‘we need to focus on each other and develop... because we don’t want to be on the path’.

There is a clear contrast in how family networks value and promote educational achievement. While Lauren discussed her family encouraging education and praising academic accomplishments, this was absent at Grace’s family gatherings. Instead, relatives were focused on athletic accomplishments and education received little attention. This imbalance contributes to the differences between Grace and her cousins. While she achieved educational accomplishments, her cousins excelled in sports, corresponding to the values their parents promoted and instilled in their habitus. This difference is most likely due to socioeconomic status as Lauren and Grace’s relatives differed by education attainment and occupational prestige. Interestingly, Hannah speaks of a similar experience at her high school and draws attention to the complexities of social class:

Yeah, like I said, most of the people there were wealthy because their parents had hit the jackpot with the real estate boom. So a lot of people, they didn’t value education and neither did their parents so going to state school or community college was actually seen as a really good thing like ‘I’m so proud of you, you’re going to college.’
Hannah’s observation exemplifies the reality that high-income does not directly cause educational success. While it may promote success through increased access to economic capital, other variables such as parental education and cultural capital influence the values parents instill in their children’s habitus. This discrepancy highlights the conceptual usefulness of socioeconomic status. While the students at Hannah’s school had access to an abundance of financial capital, their parents had not attained high levels of education and did not pass on the values nor the cultural capital that would have inspired educational success. Therefore, educational attainment is not simply an issue of access to financial capital but also cultural capital and family values.

*Expectations*

When I asked my interviewees about their parents’ expectations almost all of them quickly responded that college was the path that they were expected to take after high school. Even before thinking about college, interviewees talked about parents setting expectations for school work beginning in elementary school. This is evident as parents set strict expectations for homework at the very beginning of their children’s schooling. For instance, Becky told me, “I guess my parents pressured me to always do homework and do well in school.” While growing up, Becky’s parents instituted the same rules that she encountered at school, creating a concentration of efforts towards education and the promotion of an academically driven habitus. The pressure to do well in school and attend college was generally unanimous although there was some variation based on socioeconomic status.

High-income interviewees were usually expected to follow the paths of their parents and sometimes grandparents by attending college. Parents also set long-term expectations, teaching their children what opportunities lay ahead and were accessible. For example, Lauren explained
eagerly that, “I had been taught all my life that I was going to college and that I can go to the best colleges in the world. And so, it was an expected kind of thing.” Lauren’s family contributed to the development of a habitus that perceived endless educational opportunities. Other families set explicit expectations for their children. For instance, Meghan discussed a university legacy that almost determined her fate:

My grandfather went to [Ivy League University], my mom went to [Ivy League University], my aunt went to [Ivy League University], and I’m the first grandchild and it was like my predetermined destiny to go to [Ivy League University]. First baby pictures of me were me in [Ivy League University] stuff.

While Meghan did not end up attending [Ivy League University] like her parents and grandparents expected, she met their expectations by attending an elite liberal arts college. Although Meghan’s family had more specific expectations for her, she and Lauren both received support and encouragement to attain educational success by attending prestigious universities from their parents and extended families.

In contrast, most of my low-income interviewees were expected to forge a new path by attending college. For instance, parents and grandparents pushed future generations to achieve more than they did. Kim reflects on the evolving expectation set by her grandmother:

She always had a standard with her own children, so my aunts and uncles, that they would complete high school which is something she didn’t do until later on, very much in her older age she got her GED eventually. And for her grandkids it was definitely the standard that they were going to finish college. So there was always something better than what she had.

Unlike Meghan who was expected to continue a family legacy, Kim was expected to achieve above and beyond what her grandmother and mother had achieved. This expectation contributed to Kim’s habitus as she was pushed to pursue educational success. Claire also told me that her parents had high expectations although they themselves had not attained higher education:
They had really high expectations—going somewhere, doing something—I think I’ve perpetuated that a little bit but yeah, I think they’re the do like I say not as I do, do better than me.

Like many of my low-income interviewees, Kim and Claire reflect on the expectations their parents had although they had limited knowledge of the secondary education system. While their parents inspired a habitus that was geared towards university, they often could provide limited cultural capital to help their children navigate through their K-12 education and college application process.

Out of all 20 interviewees only two reported that their parents had no educational expectations of them and both came from low-income families. While all parents valued education, these interviewees commented on how their parents had not set an expectation for achieving higher education. Julia comments on the hopes that her parents had for her:

They have no expectations for me, I think that—I’ve been the one that’s gone the farthest in my family, so they kind of just realize—that if they support me with what I do, I’ll just do better you know. So yeah, they’re kind of like ‘Just do what you want, we hope that what you want is better’. They often say this thing that means, ‘You see where we are right now and we are here because we made mistakes in life. Like we had kids really early, we decided to move to a new country having absolutely no money, you’ve seen what it’s like for life to suck. Now hopefully that will inspire you to do better.’ I think that has been their thing and because of that, they haven’t really pushed anything on me.

Even though Julia’s mother had purchased many books for her children, she did not set explicit or even implicit expectations for them. Instead, she trusted that Julia would do the right thing, allowing her habitus to grow naturally, similar to the natural growth model. While all of my interviewees had parents that valued education, this did not lead to equal expectations. High-income parents and grandparents expected children to follow in their footsteps and attend prestigious colleges and universities. In contrast, low-income students had to forge their own paths and meet new expectations as they were being formed. Sometimes, no expectations were set and this gave students the freedom and challenge to create their own.
Parents often gave their children capital dependent on their own interests and resources. Socioeconomic status played a defining role in the distribution of capital because occupation and education have a significant influence on parents’ access to different forms and levels of capital. Consequently, students developed portfolios of capital that varied dramatically between high and low-income students. Meghan describes her parents as creative types that valued cultural enrichment. They had both received advanced degrees and pursued careers in the arts, giving them access to enormous portfolios of capital that centered on art, literature, and film. She describes a wide range of activities they helped and encouraged her to pursue:

Definitely a lot of cultural enrichment, went to a lot of museums. I swam growing up, so they were always at my swim meets. I played cello, always at cello recitals, taking me to cello lessons, taking me to some practice. For my sister, my sister is a tap dancer. So we would go to all of her dance recitals, go to master classes. We spent a lot of time in books stores and we spent a lot of the time at the movies.

The activities that Meghan participated in were greatly influenced by her parents’ interests as they pursued family activities that they enjoyed and wanted to share with their children. They also provided her with cultural enrichment through structured activities, giving her skills that she could use in her education. Her portfolio contained many diverse forms of capital and the volume of each was quite large as she pursued activities throughout her education.

Parents also helped their children by accessing social networks to provide them with the best educational opportunities. Meeting the right people helped parents and students find opportunities and gain an advantage when pursuing them. Kayla reflects on a friend she met at school and how parents influenced where their children attended high school:

And my best friend in 5th grade, her dad was the assistant superintendent of the public school system. So I think that’s probably how my mom found out about my high school, my middle-school/high school. And you could get in a lottery and it was like a 1 and 100
chance you’d get in. And I got in and my best friend got in, I was like ‘something’s going on here—I think Mr. [Name] did something.’

Kayla’s mom built social capital by talking to other parents and learning about educational opportunities available to her children. As seen in Kayla’s situation, capitalizing on key relationships can even bring about unexpected benefits. It is clear from this example that making the right connections can make all the difference. However, the ability to make these connections is often reliant on having the proper skills, knowledge, and resources to interact with other parents and discover useful information.

Parents’ level of cultural capital greatly influenced their knowledge of education and their ability to navigate the educational system. Navigation through the school system was particularly important when schools failed to meet the needs of their students. Fortunately, this capital can be shared within networks and families and if parents don’t have direct access, they can rely on others for advice and support. For instance, Kim talks about the role her aunt took on as she entered the education system:

My aunt necessarily just taught at the school and I guess was a point of guidance for the family about kind of the ways in which you have to keep an eye out for what people are saying in public schools and how they may treat your child.

Kim’s aunt offered an invaluable resource to her family as she provided accurate information and strategies for navigating the school system. While Kim’s mother had very limited knowledge of the educational system, she could call on her sister for advice and support. Kim recalls a specific example when her aunt helped her mother handle a serious situation in a constructive and efficient manner:

I remember, I think I was maybe in preschool or 1st grade. I had a teacher tell my mother that I was going to be held back and I really wasn’t going to be able to achieve anything. Like I couldn’t really read or anything which in my mind I don’t remember because I remember like having those big like science body like flip books and being able to like
read a line though I might not understand all the technical words, I was able to read everything for the most part or sound it out. And so then my mom stepped in, clearly like worried. And I don’t know if not having my aunt in education would have—how that would have turned out because I think my mom was able to calm down a little bit and just like start doing flash cards with me—take them on the bus to school and what not.

When the teacher told Kim’s mother that Kim would be held back, she was able to go to her sister for advice and take control of the situation. The solution, creating flashcards, was quite simple but with little help from Kim’s teacher and limited knowledge of the elementary school curriculum, Kim’s mother needed specific capital to address the situation properly. After acquiring this capital from her sister, Kim’s mother was able to help her daughter build the skills she needed to stay on a positive educational trajectory. Without her aunt’s help, Kim wonders if her educational trajectory would have changed, illustrating the significance of social capital. Of course, not all parents can rely on a teacher in the family. More commonly, parents’ socioeconomic status helped them navigate the school system. Kayla comments on how her mother’s upbringing influenced her navigation skills:

My mom was like a—and I attribute this to her being raised in a more middle class environment than my dad was. Like my dad was raised really working class urban [area]… And my mom grew up in suburban [state] and she like understood how to navigate financial markets and getting a house and stuff.

Kayla’s mother had the skills to finance a home as a single mother and remain involved in her children’s education. She relied on specific knowledge of the preparation needed for her children’s development and access to higher learning. Kayla reflects on the importance her mother placed on extracurricular activities:

It was very clear throughout my upbringing that she knew what kind of things kids should be doing to be able to prepare yourself for college and you’re like doing extracurricular activities.

Based on her own portfolio of capital, Kayla’s mother was aware of the types of capital students needed to succeed in school and go on to university. As a result, she attempted to provide her
children with diverse forms of capital with the limited resources that were available to her, illustrating the complexities of socioeconomic status.

Interviewees also gained capital by learning from their family members. For instance, many of my interviewees told me that they were inspired by their parents’ and siblings’ occupations and interests. For instance, when I asked Lauren to think back to her earliest aspirations she quickly responded with “gold medal gymnast” and recounted her inspiration:

My goal was to win a gold medal at age 15 or 14 for US team. Which it didn’t seem too different because my dad was on the US team and I remember it very well that that was what my daddy did. I was like, ‘I’m going to be an Olympic…I want to do that too’. I remember meeting Dominique Dawes and saying, ‘I will be like you’. (15)

Lauren set high goals for herself because the experiences she had were embedded in her habitus and she perceived that these aspirations were achievable. While a parent’s career or a chance to meet your idol may promote your aspirations, inspiration can also come in simple everyday experiences. For example, Jenny discussed the time she spent with her sister studying as being a very influential stage in her life:

I was pretty young when my sister was in high school and she’d always bring her science books home and read them. And I actually wanted to be a psychologist at one time that was before neuroscience. Because she always used to read her psychology book and I would study with her, I’d just be in the room and we’d read together. And so I think my sister and my mom were both inspirations for those.

With little intention or knowledge, Jenny’s sister helped to inspire Jenny’s career path simply by spending time with her. Jenny gained many small amounts of cultural capital over an extended period of time by learning about “psychology” through a sort of osmosis. This then became engrained in her habitus, reinforcing her interest in the sciences and contributing to her aspirations.
Economic capital is also evident through family as some interviewees were offered financial support by their extended families. Socioeconomic status can be seen across generations and may be conceptualized using social reproduction. For instance, grandparents with high socioeconomic status were cited several times as making significant financial contributions to interviewees’ education. Meghan discusses the expenses that her grandparents helped to pay:

The other thing I should mention by the way is my grandparents pay for my college tuition. My maternal grandparents, the waspy ones and they paid for a lot of my cello lessons and swim stuff growing up. Which makes sense—why I was able to do all this stuff.

While her parents were often limited by their income, Meghan’s upper-class grandparents were able to provide her with the opportunity to pursue the activities she was interested in. These were vital to Meghan’s portfolio of capital, and prevented feelings of constraint although these were not absent from her life. Another example can be seen when Lauren’s grandmother paid for ACT classes:

I took the ACT, I took it like without studying and whatever and I got a 27 and I was pissed. And so my grandmother paid for me to get Kaplan and I got a 32. Things like that, like if you have problems, if you wanted to grow, if you wanted to do and explore any intellectual aspects, family made that happen.

As Lauren discussed her family’s involvement in her education, it quickly became clear that everyone was willing to contribute when necessary. This family effort instilled Lauren’s habitus with many layers of family support, encouragement of educational success, and high aspirations. Based on these examples it is clear that coming from a middle or upper-class background enables students to rely on extended family when parents may have access to limited income.

Unfortunately, parents from low-income backgrounds had access to fewer resources and were unable to provide their children with the same forms and volumes of capital. While all
interviewees reported that their parents encouraged them to pursue higher education and were very proud of their accomplishments, decreased access to navigation, knowledge, and connections was problematic.

This lack of capital is most evident when Julia had to fill out financial paperwork to attend a prestigious private high school. Her parents lacked the economic and cultural capital they needed to help her and she faced many difficulties throughout the process:

It was hard, kind of like [college], and there were all those financial forms. So like even though like I did qualify for this sick scholarship, I still had to submit all these things and it was really hard to because my parents, they didn’t really—I mean they don’t speak English to this day… So I had to fill everything out, I had to make the calls, I had to like figure out online you know how to submit all those financial forms and I was trying to translate like telling them ‘give me this form and that form from your income tax file’ but they didn’t know what these forms meant. So yeah, it was the hardest part out of everything, just applying it was such a pain.

Julia’s parents faced language barriers and had very little understanding of the financial forms she needed to complete. This situation left her to navigate the process alone as she had access to no cultural capital but her own. Fortunately, Julia was able to complete the forms and take advantage of the elite education that was available to her.

While parents may not have had access to many forms of cultural capital, they passed on the different types of knowledge that they did have access to. While these may not have pertained directly to school, they benefited students by inspiring other interests and aspirations. For instance, Jenny comments on the activities she did with her mother, “I know when I was little I always got excited with the outdoors because of my mom, we’d always garden, she’d always explain the processes, and she’d always incorporate those.” While Jenny’s mother was not able to pass on cultural capital that was directly related to school, she passed on the knowledge that she had access to and thought would benefit Jenny’s education. Doing so
allowed her to teach her daughter to value learning and nature, which contributed to Jenny’s interest in science. This knowledge was also transformed into capital and added to Jenny’s portfolio as well as her habitus. Hannah also discussed her mother’s efforts to give her daughters cultural capital although her access to time and financial resources was extremely limited. She was able to capitalize on a unique job benefit to do so:

I have traveled a lot because my mom believes strongly in it and because that’s her job, we can fly for free. So, I’ve traveled a lot and I love to travel and I followed the 2008 election really closely and it got me really into politics so I’ve been interested in politics ever since so this job would allow me to marry my interests of politics and travel.

Hannah’s mother passed on valuable cultural capital to her daughters by exposing them to different places and cultures. By taking advantage of free transportation, she helped Hannah discover a field that she was passionate about which inspired her career aspirations. When I inquired into why her mother valued travel and took her on so many trips, Hannah responded:

Well she regrets not going to college, she grew up in a small town in [State], like she likes to tell us that she never even saw a person who wasn’t white until she was 20 and moved to the city of [City Name]. So I think she wants her children to have a life that’s different than hers, in the sense that she wants us to be exposed to more.

Hannah’s mother was motivated to give her children a life she didn’t have with the resources she had access to. The ability to travel allowed her to expose them to a world that was there for them to explore. This experience increased Hannah’s portfolio with many different forms and volumes of capital from her travels. Her habitus was also shaped by her experiences as she discovered her love of travel and saw the opportunities that were available. These ideas became layers of her changing habitus and developed into corresponding educational aspirations.

It also became apparent that there were several resources that were unique to low-class parents. When presented with opportunities, low-income parents took risks to help their children
access better resources. For example, Jamie tells the story of how she first gained access to her private high school. She begins by recounting how she learned about the school:

Through middle school, so I had an advanced math class, so I was taking geometry in 8th grade and we kind of had like our own little group, and that teacher came in one day with a flyer, making it mandatory for all girls to attend a meeting at a [Non-Profit] office and they doing an information meeting about the program, so she was like it’s part of your grade, you have to go. And we all went and I was the one who stuck with it, everyone else thought it was a joke but I thought ‘you know, I kind of don’t want to get pregnant’ at that time a lot people were going through a lot of stuff.

It is interesting that Jamie learned about the private school in an advanced math class. Her access to the school seems to depend upon this fact, which may partially be explained by good fortune. While Jamie was a good student throughout her education, it is not evident that she would have had access to the same opportunity if she wasn’t in advanced math or if she had been absent that day. With this amazing opportunity presented to Jamie, she recalls how her parents reacted:

My mother initially was terrified, she thought ‘how are we going to pay for this, it’s really far from where we lived, how are you going to get to school, you know’ so she was looking more logistics and my dad thought, you know, ‘we’ll figure it out.’

As a family reliant on a very low-income, it is no surprise that Jamie’s mother was worried about the costs that the family would incur if Jamie had to commute to school. It is unlikely that Jamie would have attended the private high school without her father’s support, missing many academic and extracurricular opportunities she would later gain access to. As Jamie noted, she was the only student to complete the application process and attend the private high school. While others may have dropped out due to lack of interest, it is very likely that financial resources also influenced their decision.

In order to help their children attain the best education possible, parents with fewer resources also had to be resourceful. Parents and students relied on three different methods to gain access to resources normally out of their reach: freebies, scholarships, and connections. For
instance, Grace talks about how she prepared for the SATs, forgoing test prep classes and books and relying on free resources that she could access at school and online:

Because we tried to be very tight budget… we were very like trying to conserve. So a lot of the stuff I did was like the career counselor put out free books and I like grabbed them all and take them home with me or go to teachers and ask to borrow their study thing and turn it back to them and then do online stuff.

While middle-class students might not worry about purchasing a test prep book, Grace was very aware of her family’s financial situation and the efforts she needed to make in order to find test prep resources. While a tight budget created a constraint for Grace, support from her family and favorite teachers prevented this constraint from limiting the educational opportunities available to her.

Parents would also try to compensate for their lack of cultural capital by doing research and finding people who had the knowledge and capital that their children needed. Kim describes her mother’s determination to find opportunities and resources for her:

And so more and more and she tried not to ever be limited by that knowledge though of whatever so if I said something she would figure out how to research and find out internships, that possibility was there for me. And she was always going to find people who knew for sure what I needed.

Because Kim’s mother did not have the cultural capital she needed to help Kim succeed, she relied on her resourcefulness and perseverance to find the people who did. This mindset contributed to promoting the accumulation of capital when possible and a habitus that was focused on education and finding the resources necessary to achieve educational success.

In contrast, parents who had access to greater cultural capital used it to compensate for their lack of economic capital by capitalizing on their knowledge and resourcefulness. Kayla talks about how her mom had the right knowledge but had access to extremely limited financial resources. Compensating for her lack of resources required tremendous effort as she hunted
down scholarships to give her children the opportunities she felt they deserved. Kayla describes the challenges her mother encountered:

We weren’t able to do everything that she wanted us to be able to do and like finding the resources that made it so that we could do the things that like she as someone who grew up pretty middle class understood that like were things that you should do in life to be able to get ahead. So, understanding that yes my income is low for like the United States in comparison but I had a mom who was extremely resourceful and was able to battle a lot of things, to be able to give us what she considered to be a good middle-class life on the resources that we had.

It is clear that Kayla’s mother relied heavily on her knowledge of the middle-class in order to identify the resources she wanted to provide for her children. She then worked tirelessly to provide these resources on a limited-income. Although this was an arduous process, Kayla’s mother knew cultural capital was vital for educational success and acceptance into university, making it a top priority.

SCHOOL

Another field that greatly influences a student’s habitus and accumulation of capital is school. While my interviewees all went to high-income schools, they also had several other factors in common. The patterns that developed appear to stem from advanced courses where my interviewees interacted with excellent teachers and motivated peers.

Coursework

All of my interviewees reported taking honors, AP, and/or IB courses while in high school. Several also commented on being placed in the gifted or advanced curriculum while in elementary and middle school. These advanced courses generally offered students challenging and enjoyable coursework, boosting their cultural capital and love of school. Anna reflected on
the benefits of advanced courses when she described the aspects of school that she enjoyed the most:

One thing I liked, I think, so there was like that challenge, they expected a lot from you. There wasn’t a lot of pressure to succeed or be better than everybody else but there were challenges to keep you involved and trying to learn more—while trying your best at the same time.

Anna cites challenging coursework as one of her favorite parts of school. Not only did students earn more cultural capital by engaging in more rigorous material, they also became engaged and interested in their coursework, creating a habitus geared towards learning. This statement mirrors all of my interviewees who found challenging classes to be the most enjoyable aspect of school.

While most of my interviewees mentioned few difficulties gaining access to high level classes, several interviewees report issues entering classes that would benefit them. These obstacles were often created by tracking systems and overcoming them required knowledge of the educational system, yet another form of cultural capital. Grace remembers her frustration when she entered a new high school and wanted to take an advanced math course:

I do remember being very frustrated where I went, when I first came in and said ‘I wanted to do an IB math class’ and they said ‘well, you can’t, you haven’t taken this course’ and I was ready to take a course in the summer and double up and they just really did not want me to do anything, like ‘Well, we’re sorry but you’re not on the track because you didn’t come in on the right level.’ So in that sense, those who had the resources and were prepared at the very beginning to be placed in that track would end up in like higher, higher level—like super high level IB classes. Those who didn’t get any attention, they weren’t going into IB, so in that sense it was very restricted and constrained.

While Grace was extremely proactive, talking to teachers and guidance counselors, she encountered a tracking system that was nearly impossible to overcome. Entering a new school, she did not have the knowledge that was needed to navigate the system efficiently and successfully. The feelings of constraint she felt were incorporated into her habitus. Fortunately,
she also gained many opportunities through encouraging teachers so that this constraint was outweighed by positive experiences.

Being able to navigate the educational system is extremely important for having a positive educational experience. While regular level classes may be well-suited to some students, my interviewees complained of poor quality teaching, boredom, and discouragement, suggesting that these classes were of lower quality. Many of the responses mirrored the frustrations of Jenny, who commented on the problems she experienced in regular level courses:

I—didn’t like how disorganized it was sometimes, if felt like teachers were just kind of babysitting sometimes for some classes, like for the lower level classes especially. When teachers were just like this is a requirement but it’s not that big of a deal. It was just like they didn’t care… so it didn’t like spark my interest.

Regular classes were frequently described as babysitting and students were bored and miserable. Unlike advanced courses where students were engaged and excited to learn, regular classes offered little stimulation nor incentive to work hard. From these accounts, it appears as though, the quality of education depended tremendously on the course level. This difference may suggest that the tracking system acts as a self-fulfilling prophecy. For instance, Sarah describes friends who took regular classes and the differences she noticed:

[They] just like when they went to class like everything just sort of stagnated and they never pushed to do anything. So there was definitely a completely different focus on outcome for students that choose to do accelerated classes or you know were able to do accelerated classes and kids that weren’t. If they could, then they should. Because it just had a completely different path attached to it, a different trajectory.

While students were challenged, encouraged, and taught to enjoy learning in advanced classes, those in the lower classes were not pushed to excel and were place on a different trajectory all together. Rather than gathering capital and developing a positive education oriented habitus, students developed a habitus composed of boredom and stagnation. Because tracking systems are
so difficult to navigate, students are frequently stuck in these classes, gathering negative experiences that contribute to a sense of constraint and helplessness, increasing their risk of educational failure.

In order to understand tracking, it is necessary to understand the placement system. Tracking begins early in most schools, with placement being determined by state test scores or IQ tests in elementary school. Lauren recollects her experience with the tracking system:

If you, you know, we also by 5th grade split into two classes, we didn’t realize this, to two classes—the smarter class and the not as smart class based on our [state] scores. And so based on what class you were in you got a little bit more freedom to do things. Things were more challenging but more fun at the same time.

Lauren reflects on how she was placed in the “smart class” and the benefits that students were able to enjoy. She accumulated more cultural capital in more difficult courses and also more enjoyment, building positive educational experiences into her habitus. Not surprisingly, this system is far from perfect and the placement of students does not always align as expected. For example, Meghan explained the process and recounted how her sister was not placed in advanced even though she received high marks:

Okay, so you took an IQ test in 4th grade that [the school] administered if you’d be starred by your teachers. And that IQ test if you have a certain IQ placed you in either SIS… or HSIS which I was in.

She continues on:

It was funny because my sister took the same test and didn’t do as well on it until 8th grade when they eventually got her into high honors. But it was just interesting because my sister’s grades have always been phenomenal. She’s excellent at math, excellent in science and here I am in these classes and I’m like, ‘Why am I here. I know I’m smart, but why isn’t my sister here?’

The first step to gaining access to advanced classes was being selected by a teacher, a rather subjective process allowing for plenty of error. Students then had to take an IQ test which is also a less than perfect measure of intelligence and ability. While Meghan was able to incorporate
advanced courses into her habitus early on, her sister encountered more barriers when trying to access this resource.

In fact, the tracking system was a concern of several of my participants who worried that not all students were given the resources they needed to reach their potential. Lauren recalls the different treatment bestowed on students in different academic levels and how this influenced students’ perceptions and feelings towards education:

It’s a sense of separation even when you’re young. That if you aren’t put in the smart kid group, you’ll never get in the smart kid group. And what’s the point, you won’t get into the best of anything, you won’t be the best of anything. So that means you better be real good at sports, you better sing, act, dance your heart out and people love you. You better do something else that is not going to be intellectually focused. Which I think is horrible for a couple of reasons… You lose potential scientists or people who might have—might peak or grow later on in life who would never know because they don’t feel smart enough ever and you just never do… I thought it was atrocious and unfair to both sides.

Lauren was frustrated by the separation that she saw in her school. Coming from an extremely competitive school system, she felt as though once students were placed in the secondary group they were disadvantaged when competing academic resources. Students incorporate this constraint into their habitus and aspirations, limiting themselves and their abilities. Thus, the student experience is greatly influenced by context and the student’s perception of opportunities.

As Lauren reflected on this topic she also brought up a significant point. She wondered how much potential has been lost because students do not feel adequate, a very real feeling documented in the literature. While students lose the opportunity to achieve the best education possible, society also loses out because its members do not reach their potential and contribute all that they are capable of. Grace made a similar comment when discussing the low-income students of color at her school:

I was able to see some of those groups and the interaction between teachers and different ethnic groups and I could tell that there was this—slightly unfair, I’m sure they weren’t
conscious about it, attention towards people who didn’t necessarily try as hard but still were able to get to that class and be able to pass the exam because they knew somebody and they had a tutor and kind of—read over the books. Whereas the other students, those who were working very hard, the teachers that really put effort into them, were very proud of them and wanted to really help build them up but [there] were predominantly a lot of teachers that by-passed them, they didn’t really try to build them up. I guess in a sense—I could have become one of that group. When I came in I was performing exceptionally well for my old high school but then being brought up a notch because this was supposed to be a higher level school and if I had not taken the initiative, it’s very likely I could have just been put into a mediocre class.

After closely observing her peers, Grace noticed a distinction between students who used outside resources, economic capital, and those who relied solely on hard work. While many teachers encouraged students who put in a lot of time and effort, others seemed to “by-pass them”. It is unfortunate that these students failed to receive teacher encouragement because it could have benefited them tremendously. Coming from low-income backgrounds, they mostly likely did not have strong portfolios of capital and may have developed a habitus that questioned their academic abilities as they tried to compete with high-income students in the upper-class, predominantly Caucasian school system. Interestingly, Grace says that she too could have become “one of that group.” Entering a more competitive school required her to take initiative and pursue the courses and activities that would give her cultural capital and help her achieve her educational goals. Grace’s determination was encouraged by the support she received from her family as well as from teachers whom she befriended at her new school. Unfortunately, not all students had access to the support and resources they needed, most likely leading them to reject the school norms and follow a downward trajectory away from educational success.

Access to advanced courses helped to positively shape students’ habitus by instilling a passion for learning and engaging students with challenging coursework. In contrast, students in regular courses were given few challenges and ending up stagnating as teachers provided little encouragement.
Teachers

Another benefit of advanced courses is access to high quality teachers. Teachers are able to pass on many invaluable benefits to their students and the very best teachers are often found teaching the top courses. Very broadly, teachers give their students valuable capital and knowledge that they may not have had access to elsewhere. Teachers can also instill a passion for learning and encourage students to explore their academic interests. Teachers contribute greatly to their students’ evolving habitus. My interviewees cite numerous instances when teachers, often their favorites, gave them various types of capital as well as support and guidance.

All of my interviewees reflected on a favorite teacher, someone who they often shared a connection with. Many parallels become apparent as they commented on many of the same aspects. Not surprisingly, the best teachers were frequently described as being supportive, enthusiastic, welcoming, and knowledgeable about the subjects that they taught. Anna reflects on the features she liked the most about her teachers:

I think what made them unique was that they seemed to always be happy to be teaching so there was never a dull or kind of sad moment but they were always enthusiastic and event if you didn’t do extremely well, they were encouraging and very happy to help you and keep you going… [Never letting] the things you mess up on bring you down.

Not only did Anna’s teachers make learning enjoyable by being upbeat and passionate, they also provided valuable encouragement to help students stay motivated when they were struggling. This support from teachers helped students develop a positive attitude towards school and a habitus that welcomed academic challenges. Lynn also discussed how her teachers’ encouragement helped her to excel in school. She remembered how her favorite teachers helped her become comfortable in the classroom:
I think so the teachers that kind of I was able to form relationships outside the classroom. Because they made me more comfortable because I was usually pretty quiet and it’s hard for me to kind of like articulate my thoughts. But then because I had a comfort level with the teachers it made group learning easier.

Forming a bond with teachers who were encouraging gave Lynn the support she needed to participate in class. The comfort level that Lynn mentions may be recognized as a change in attitude towards her communication abilities and class participation which was incorporated into her habitus and will continue to benefit her throughout her education.

Teachers can also give their students explicit forms of capital to add to their portfolios and use throughout their education. Meghan reflects on how a high school English teacher helped her gain cultural capital that matched the students she met in university who had attended prestigious private high schools:

She taught AP English and I had her for two years. And that is one of the classes I feel like really prepared me for [Sample College] because one of the first conversations I had with my friends at [Sample College] was about books they had read. I felt like I had read all the same books as all the [Academy] kids had read.

When forming her first relationships in university, Meghan was able to use the cultural capital her teacher had given her to converse confidently with upper-class students. This experience illustrates the importance of capital as Meghan pulled from her portfolio to find the information she had learned not for class but for social interactions with fellow students. Her habitus also played a role in the interaction as she recognized her abilities to converse with students from an elite school, giving her confidence and a sense of comfort knowing that she had been received a comparable education. Similarly, Jenny recalls how her favorite teacher gave her the social capital she needed to find and utilize opportunities:

The most important thing that I know helped me achieve at all the high schools are the opportunities that they provided so--and the advertisements of the opportunities. Actually my favorite teachers were the ones that taught me how to use those resources.
So the access to being aware of the tools at the different schools I went to, the most important thing out of all the high schools.

Jenny’s reflection highlights the importance of the knowledge and skills that are needed to locate and capitalize on opportunities. While Jenny’s mother did not have access to this capital, Jenny was able to access it through her teachers. This knowledge was then incorporated into Jenny’s portfolio as well as into her habitus as she gained access to new opportunities. Similarly, Jamie describes the efforts of a music teacher to help her find new opportunities in order to pursue her passion, music. Like Jenny, Jamie’s parents had little cultural capital but her teacher did and she was able to open up many doors for Jamie. Jamie recalls learning about a prestigious scholarship:

And the music department, for a high school especially for the schools in my area was great. The head of the music department you know she was really, really supportive. She helped me apply for another scholarship program, specifically just for music. It was basically a conservatory and I’m not using that term lightly. It was intense. Without her teacher’s help, Jamie would never have learned about this program which ended up giving her an immense volume and variety of cultural capital, enriching her life and transforming her habitus. When teachers learn of their students’ interests, they offer encouragement as well as help navigating the system. This assistance gives students access to enriching activities that positively shape their habitus. This is particularly true for low-income students who may not have access to plentiful opportunities due to limited economic resources. Access to opportunities will greatly benefit the habitus by outweighing constraints, offering new sources of capital, and supporting students’ aspirations. In addition to offering specific advice on scholarships and accessing resources, teachers also provide general support and encouragement. Grace describes her favorite teacher as a confidant and mentor:

One of my closest friends, she literally took me under her wing, that’s probably one of the reasons why I did very well in school. Because not only did I have ambition but I was afraid, when I came in because I had no idea… you’re trying to find your niche but again all of these people had been together since kindergarten and no one really wants to make
new friends. She really took me under her wing since the first day and she got me to like Spanish club and leadership and encouraged me. I told her about scholarships, I told her about activities, I shared with her about what was going on at home, and from the very beginning to now she has been my closest friend, confidant. She was like a second mother to me at school so that type of kind of guidance helped me.

She continues on:

So in that sense, like that mentorship and guidance you really need to just push you just a couple more inches like go ask the teacher what’s going on or be ambitious and talk to the IB coordinator to get your head start.

It is clear from Grace’s description that teachers are able to provide the encouragement, support, and knowledge needed to reaffirm the development of a habitus geared towards educational success. This can be done by helping to shape students’ “place in the world” by promoting the belief that they are talented students who can go on to do great things. Lauren comments on how a history teacher contributed to her habitus in a similar manner:

Loved him, he taught me that yes, like you’re not just average smart, like you’re really smart and it’s a great thing and he cultivated a real challenge. Where it was like the first class where I really had a challenge.

Lauren speaks highly of her favorite teacher because he challenged her and helped her to discover her academic talents. By engaging his students in the classroom, Lauren’s teacher helped to pass on valuable cultural capital as students eagerly studied the course material and rigorously prepared for the AP examination. He also contributed to Lauren’s habitus as she incorporated her talents into her perception of her academic abilities and future aspirations.

Teachers’ influence on students is not limited to close relationships and continued guidance. Teachers’ comments can also stick with students as they chart their trajectories through school. Affirmative statements helped to support students’ aspirations and assure students that they were in fact attainable. Claire’s teacher contributed to her habitus as she still remembers when her physics teacher congratulated her and said, “Now you can go change the
world.” While this statement may have been made in passing, it stuck with Claire and contributed towards a habitus that aspires to academic success and a prestigious occupation.

Teachers also have the ability to negatively influence students’ evolving habitus. While my interviewees generally recounted positive memories of their teachers, they also noted one or two teachers who negatively influenced their experience. Although they told stories of enjoying school and being avid learners, when recounting one’s least favorite teacher, the tone changed dramatically. For instance, Lynn comments on her least favorite teacher, a math teacher, and describes why she didn’t like him saying, “I just felt that he was very short-tempered and he didn’t treat his students equally and he definitely played favorites.” When I inquired into how he played favorites she continued on to describe his behavior in class:

So obviously like in a class after like taking a few tests you can see very clearly like these are the students who understand things, they’re at the top of the class, and these are the students that don’t. So he definitely favored those who did well but didn’t really give students who didn’t do well a chance.

By favoring students who performed well, Lynn’s teacher enlarged the disparity between students who excelled and those who struggled. Consequently, this created two different allotments of capital and shaped two very different forms of habitus. Students who excelled gained positive experiences in the class and these contributed to a habitus that “enjoyed” math, forming a field-habitus match. In contrast, students who struggled gained discouraging experiences because they did not receive the support and resources they needed to have a positive learning experience. This situation instilled negative experiences into students’ habitus, contributing to a negative attitude towards math and a field-habitus clash. It is unfortunate that students must undergo this type of negative habitus development in school because it is avoidable with adequate support and encouragement from teachers.
Teachers may also negatively influence top-performing students. Sarah describes how an elementary school teacher tried to “take her down a notch”:

She was just mean… So I had her for 3rd and 4th grade and she was just discouraging. I was probably very precocious at that point because I had been told I was good in school for quite a while… She didn’t want to give me perfect grades for things. She would sort of challenge me when I said the right answers and stuff like that. She was discouraging. I loved school all the time until I went to her class and that was like the first time I ever came home from school crying because I felt like she had been mean to me. So she was just like whatever… rough spot along the way. But after I left her class I loved school again.

Although Sarah was a top-student who enjoyed school, her teacher had a significant impact on her educational experience. Teachers are able to make school enjoyable or unpleasant often by encouraging or discouraging their students. Even a student like Sarah, who was actively acquiring capital and building an upward trajectory, was negatively influenced by a discouraging teacher early on in her education. Luckily, as she says, this was simply a “rough spot along the way” as she picked up her positive trajectory the next year with a new teacher. It is clear that teachers play an influential role in the development of students’ habitus. Teachers may build up students’ habitus with valuable capital and useful knowledge, helping students navigate the educational system and find useful resources. Teachers may also act as a destructive force that discourages students and limits their habitus. Interestingly, many of the resources teachers pass on to students are not directly related to course curriculum, suggesting that they are a valuable resource far beyond the scope of the classroom.

**Friends**

Friends also provided social relationships that have the potential to promote the development of a habitus oriented towards educational success. Independent of race and socioeconomic status, interviewees generally described their friends as supportive and academically driven. For instance, Emily describes her friends as high-achievers:
Most of my friends were really into academics as well and they all had really high goals for themselves after high school. Most of them were pretty active — involved in school organizations and clubs and stuff so I don’t want to use the word over achievers but people who did a lot of things.

Emily’s friends were very driven individuals. They worked hard in school, participated in activities to prepare for college, and set high goals for themselves. These characteristics illustrate the influence that social composition has on students’ success because they may be encouraged, as in this situation, or discouraged from attaining academic success. Emily’s friends had similar portfolios of capital and experiences that contributed to the development of an education oriented habitus. Emily shared these experiences and values, and therefore, she fit in easily with her friend group and developed a similar habitus.

Interestingly, all of my interviewees reported being in a friend group that was focused on school. Like Emily, many noted their friends’ drive and dedication to academics. In most schools, students began developing friend groups in elementary and middle school. As they got older, many students stayed friends with the same people they had befriended in elementary school. Kelly expands on this process by discussing the friends she grew up with and the characteristics that she had in common with them:

So everybody pretty much grows up with the same group of people. So most of my friends were people I had met in middle school and we were all pretty much like [Sample College] people. You know very tough and academically challenging and it was just like we informally competed with each other a lot over grades and stuff like that. So it was a good way to sort of push everyone to the top.

Kelly highlights how friends motivated her academic success as they pushed one another to earn the best grades through informal competition. Competitive friends helped each other earn more capital as they worked hard in class. They also contributed to an education oriented habitus because they strongly valued education.
Friends can also give many forms of capital to one another and it appears as though low-income students rely more heavily on their peers for capital acquisition. For instance, it is evident that friends can provide social and cultural capital as low-income interviewees reflected on the networks and skills they developed when interacting with high-income peers. Lynn discusses the benefits she gained by interacting with the wealthy students at her private high school:

Yeah so for example like some kid in my grade whose grandma owned [company] and [movie] was filmed in his lake house and he’s super cool and super chill. I guess kind of learning even at the high school level that connections are so important in the future. And networking and being able to have small talk with people and how to learn the language of your environment.

Lynn mentions two important facts about her experience that exemplify Bourdieu’s concept of capital. By interacting with peers who were of a higher socioeconomic status she learned about the importance of connections and networks as well as how to speak the language of this elite group. Therefore, Lynn was able to gain cultural capital by learning the language and social capital by building valuable connections, increasing the volume and variety of her portfolio dramatically. As she gained capital, Lynn also incorporated her experiences into her habitus, increasing her opportunities and aspirations.

Friends could also help provide more formal types of capital when they gave advice for navigation and other useful information. Becky recounts how she learned about the college process and made sure she was prepared:

I got started really early, I heard from older kids how awful it is so I did it all throughout the summer, the guidance counselors at our school were actually pretty terrible… So I had to do a lot of research on my own and my friends, my older friends who were already in college and stuff like that. Informal knowledge passed down from older friends helped Becky prepare for the college application process. Giving Becky the information they had learned during the application
process allowed her to incorporate their knowledge into her portfolio early on, increasing both the efficiency and effectiveness of her applications. This knowledge also gave Becky a better perspective on the college process so that she could set realistic expectations.

However, differences in socioeconomic status sometimes created difficulties when trying to form friendships. Several interviewees discussed problems they encountered when interacting with their high-income peers. These social interactions sometimes illuminated differences in prestige and income that were difficult to overcome. For example, Hannah remembers how she had difficulties finding friends at her high school and a group that she could fit into:

I more tried to fit in with the really smart kids and like I said before, that was a problem for me because they had these famous parents. One guy, his dad was always on CNN giving—commenting and people’s parents were surgeons and lawyers and it was hard for me to fit into that intellectual group because my mom didn’t go to college, she doesn’t work one of those prestigious jobs. And so that was the group I tried to fit in and I felt my socioeconomic status prevented me from fitting in.

Hannah comments on the importance of occupation prestige and how she felt as though she didn’t fit in because her mother didn’t have a prestigious job. This situation contributed to feelings of isolation and frustration as Hannah had few peers who came from similar backgrounds and had the same interests as she did her. This experience introduced a sense of constraint into Hannah’s habitus and set her apart from her peers. Fortunately, support from her family and high career aspirations built on a strong portfolio of capital kept Hannah on a positive educational trajectory.

While it may seem as though parental occupation should not influence friendship groups, occupation is correlated with many variables such as access to resources and the availability of cultural capital. Jenny makes a similar remark that builds off of Hannah’s experience as Jenny reflects on the economic barriers that prevented friendships from forming:
Yeah, I just didn’t feel like I related to them as much because their type of complaints, people in the AP classes were like—they had more money to spend on like activities. They’d go out and have dinner or go out and do a weekend road trip you know and I couldn’t really afford those kinds of things and most of them had cars. So it was just—it was hard to relate to them in that sense, I didn’t reach out and try to as often as I probably could have, should have.

Jenny reflects on several interesting factors. She had difficulty relating to her high-income peers because she could not pursue the same activities nor could she relate to their complaints. Therefore, she was not only limited in what she could do but also in what she could understand. Even though she attended the same school and took advantage of many of the advanced courses, Jenny’s habitus had not incorporated the same activities and opportunities that her peers enjoyed. This distinction created a barrier that Jenny was unable to overcome because her habitus clashed with the expected social rules and skills at school.

Even for students who felt as though their socioeconomic status did not separate them from wealthy students, many middle and low-income students encountered uncomfortable situations. The majority of these recollections centered on sweet 16 parties and holiday gifts. Kim provided a critical insight by describing how she learned to avoid the questions that created tensions:

So those few instances where certain holidays or special monumental moments you would—actually feel some type of way about not getting certain things or feeling as if—you know another holiday where someone’s going to ask me and I can’t really say much. But yeah I guess as I got older, I kind of learned how to kind of avoid those conversations and people also learned who to have those conversations with. Where you know if they actually wanted to compare things for value—you have a few ass-holes but a lot of people weren’t malicious—enough to purposely have a conversation with someone who’s never going to get that for a special occasion.

Kim’s experience highlights the role that material goods play in high school status structures and the consumption cleavages that appear when low-income students enter high-income schools. Because Kim went to a private high-income school, most students enjoyed extravagant parties
and pricey gifts. This social norm conflicted with those accepted by low-income students and created a constraint as students found themselves in situations where they were expected to compare status items. Kim notes that students would eventually learn to separate low and high-income students when comparing possessions. This process exemplifies how students learn to navigate fields, earn capital, and develop habitus. Low-income students may experience frustration and resentment as they compete with high-income peers, developing a habitus that contains many negative experiences. Students may also find a social subculture, allowing them to avoid class conflicts and focus on school.

Some interviewees experienced feelings of misunderstanding and frustration when interacting with high-income peers. Claire comments on the expectations her peers set and the complex nature of socioeconomic status. Claire’s parents are divorced and she lived with her mother growing up. However, her dad, who was better off financially, would give her presents on special occasions. These items complicated Claire’s experience at school by signaling a higher socioeconomic status:

Yeah, my dad would be able to give us nicer things so on the outside it didn’t really look like I was—I think that was always part of the problem... Being in school, people expected me to... Just like one of the kids who was in AP classes and I’m not a minority and I looked like I should be able to pay for things. When I couldn’t they were like... I just looked lazy.

Although Claire had nice things, she also struggled to pay the dues for clubs and activities. Her peers assumed she was affluent based on her appearance and could not understand the deeper family dynamic that complicated her financial situation. Claire was frustrated by this and her feelings of constraint and misperception were incorporated into her habitus. However, she did not reject the schools norms but strove to attain educational success and attend a university far from home. It is important to note that this habitus was also influenced by parental and teacher
support that encouraged academic success and high aspirations. It is fortunate that this support was available so that her peers’ misunderstanding did not result in the rejection of educational norms.

Hannah also faced misunderstanding because high-income students did not understand her financial situation and she discussed her experience at great length. Two specific challenges she faced were learning how to drive and having a job. First, she talks about not having a car and the limitations she experienced:

So not having a car was definitely the worst thing about high school and I got a lot of teasing about it of ‘[Hannah] you’re almost 18, you don’t know how to drive yet?’ I think they didn’t understand that when you only have one parent and that parent always works, it’s not that I didn’t want to learn it was just that I didn’t have that resource and I couldn’t pay for lessons so, so that was hard. And then I couldn’t just buy, well I should say my parents couldn’t just buy me a car right away so that was something I felt was very hurtful and also misunderstood.

While most students expected to have their parents give them a car and be driving at 16, Hannah did not have this opportunity. Her peers assumed this was a choice that she had made but in reality it was simply due to her family’s limited access to financial and time resources. This experience was incorporated into Hannah’s developing habitus as she struggled to find friends that understood her situation and deal with the constraints of not having transportation to go to activities and social events. Hannah also discusses being the only person at school with a job:

Nobody else at my high school had a job so it was hard to explain to anybody why I couldn’t do something on the weekend, that’s on the rare occasion that I was invited to do something. And it was ‘No, I have to work’ and also, I would see—the people I went to high school [with] all the time. Every Friday and Saturday night, I would be ripping their tickets, selling them their popcorn and it was--I wasn’t ashamed of my job but—it was still frustrating feeling like I was the only one who had one.

Again, Hannah experienced frustration because none of her peers could understand her situation, which contributed to her sense of isolation and frustration. These experiences were also incorporated into her habitus, pushing her to attend a good university far from home.
It is clear that socioeconomic status greatly influences students’ interactions with one another. Students learn who to talk to, what to talk about, and how to navigate through conversations that may highlight uncomfortable economic disparities. Students dealt with misunderstanding and frustration most noticeably when they had few friends who understood their situation. These situations highlight the social conditions that may contribute to the formation of subgroups or deviant groups. As students interact with one another they often find they have more in common with students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds because of similar portfolios, experiences, or possessions and thus, a group is formed along class boundaries. Entering a field where income disparities were present increased the danger of field-habitus clash and rejection as low-income students experience greater frustration and isolation.

My interviewees generally found friends with whom they shared a common experience. No one discussed the formation of subgroups or deviants groups although groups did form along class and race lines. For instance, many of my interviewees found friends who could bond over their cultural experiences together. Kelly talks about her friends and remarks that:

And a lot of them were children of first generation immigrants. So we had that all academic pressure in common and we all sort of understood what it was like to have that much pressure and expectations on you.

Kelly and her friends bonded over a shared experience, a commonality that allowed for a sense of understanding and also commiseration. These experiences also meant that they had developed a similar habitus that incorporated the “pressures and expectations” placed on first generation Americans. Other interviewees, like Kim, found friends based on a similar racial background. This shared experience proved important for almost all of my interviewees who identified as a person of color. When I inquired into the characteristics that Kim shared with her friends she replied:
We’re all black and it’s a predominately white institution so you end up bonding over shared experience recognizing that your life sucks. And people don’t think you’re pretty and—you don’t share that amount of wealth other people have. And even if you were someone’s girlfriend there would be a hesitation to bring you home.

As a member of a small group of African American students in a predominately Caucasian, upper-class school, Kim and her friends experienced a wide array of social challenges. Kim recounts numerous instances of racist comments, discrimination, and isolation. While this was an extremely difficult time for Kim, she benefited from having friends who could empathize with her and deal with the racial challenges they faced together. Kim’s habitus incorporated the struggles that she encountered as well as support she gained from her family and friends. This support is vital for preventing a field-habitus clash that could potentially lead to a lowered educational trajectory.

Friendships were also formed based on similar socioeconomic background. Interestingly, this was specifically noted by low-income interviewees although two high-income interviewees did mention experiencing uncomfortable class differences in their friendship groups. Julia discussed how her friend group formed:

I feel like we’ve kind of come to the conclusion amongst my friends that we were all the scholarship you know like all the poor kids tend—somehow ended up hanging out together.

At Julia’s prestigious boarding school, students on scholarship befriended one another and seemed to limit their interactions with high-income peers. While the majority of the students self-segregated by race, the scholarship group was composed of students from many different ethnic backgrounds. It appears as though low-income students bonded over their shared socioeconomic status which was distinct from all of the other students. As scholarship students, they had also incorporated many similar experiences into their habitus such as prior low-income educational environments, similar family characteristics, and differences between their homes
and school. The similarity in habitus allowed for students to understand one another by sharing the same attitudes as well as empathizing with similar constraints and opportunities. Julia goes on to explain how finding friends with similar experiences also helped her to share the obstacles she faced. She describes a frequent dilemma that she and her roommate encountered frequently:

I remember it at least for me and my roommates because I got pretty lucky, I got placed with girls who were scholarship just like me and I feel like for us it was harder to keep up with our rich friends because like I told you, I also had a couple pretty wealthy friends who were just very humble. Like it was hard to like go out and eat with them too because the town that my high school is in is very much like [Town]... It was hard for us to go out with them or like they would invite us to do all these things but it was hard because we just couldn’t afford it. Or we went out with them one day but then they wanted to do something the next day but then we’re like, ‘well we actually only have like 5 bucks left, should we do it or not’ but like we wanted to be friends with them so we want to do it so there was also that. The pressure of like you want to be friends with them but you can’t afford to and they don’t really understand the way you live so like it’s hard for them to realize that you can’t afford it.

It is interesting to see how socioeconomic status influences life style. The activities that were taken for granted by some are obstacles for others. As Julia and her roommate tried to navigate the field composed of high-income students, they were constantly challenged to play the game at a pace that was simply too fast for the financial resources they had access to. This is yet another example of the influence of socioeconomic status on friendship formation and the constraints that are placed on low-income students when trying to interact with their high-income peers.

While some interviewees mentioned shared experiences as well as taste in music and pop culture, most said that their friends were academically driven, a trait that tied them together. Not surprisingly, my interviewees also commented that they met most of their friends through advanced classes and academic clubs. Access to these resources provided valuable networks where students could find friends who came from similar backgrounds and shared the same educational interests. Unfortunately, not all students have access to academic resources and they
form friendships based solely on race and/or socioeconomic status. Grace comments on the low-income friend groups in her school:

You know, of the class, that is predominately upper-class, then you have middle class which kind of goes between those and then you have low-income, those individuals tend to stay closer together and not perform as well, unfortunately.

Based on the cultural capital that is required to navigate the education system and the financial capital that is often needed to access activities, many low-income students do not have access to the best education even if they attend a high-income school. This leaves them in regular courses where they are not challenged and meet peers who are also experiencing frustration and helplessness. Students’ experiences feed into a habitus that has developed little excitement for education and has instead lowered its aspirations. Students in this situation are likely to travel on a lower trajectory towards the rejection of school norms through withdrawal or the formation of subgroups and deviant groups. Therefore, it appears as though access to the best resources prevents the formation of friendships groups that rely solely on shared socioeconomic status and frustrations. Instead, students develop friendships based on academics and extracurricular activities.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

All of my interviewees mentioned participating in at least one club and most named three or four. Activities were often academic such as science bowl as well as interest based such as speech and debate, volunteering, student government, and athletics. Based on this pattern, it is evident that extracurricular activities provide students with an abundance of skills that may be classified as capital and are used to shape students’ habitus. Students used the opportunities they had access to in order to explore their passions and develop their career aspirations. For instance, Kayla discovered a cause that she is passionate about by traveling and doing mission work:

I initially wanted to do international stuff like development and poverty alleviation because my mom worked at this church, again my mom being extremely resourceful, I
was able to go on a couple mission trips to Brazil where I worked with kids who live in some of the like poorest areas of the Northeastern area of the country and worked with them in their school and building like an adult education center and an art building for the school which was like really—like it really impacted what I wanted to do with my life. Because education is really important for kids who are like trying to get out of like these kinds of situations and because they don’t have access to that kind of education in Brazil right now, it’s just not there. So I wanted to be like a teacher and work on that but also realizing that that kind of stuff can be done through social work and like social programs and that kind of thing which is really interesting to me.

While Kayla may have developed an interest in social work without attending these mission trips, these experiences made significant contributions to her portfolio of capital and habitus. She strengthened her portfolio by experiencing new cultures and gaining valuable skills. She also incorporated new knowledge and experiences into her habitus, allowing her to develop unique aspirations based on her interests. Similarly, Lauren told me about an academic summer program and how she was inspired to further her education:

And I got into a program at the [University] in high school after my first year where during the summers, I spent at [University] or [University] doing math, doing economics, computer programming. I actually did a summer at the [University] and discovered I wanted an MBA over anything else.

Lauren was able to learn skills in many subjects that contributed to her portfolio of capital. She was also able to practice these in a new field, a university campus, building up her habitus and preparing her for college.

My interviewees also discussed other benefits of pursuing extracurricular activities including taking on leadership roles and finding activities they excelled in. Many talked about excelling in one or two specific activities and they took great pride in their accomplishments. These positive experiences not only built cultural capital but social capital as well. Students gain new skills and new connections especially when events were held in different schools. Activities also built up students’ confidence with new opportunities, affirming their evolving habitus that their aspirations were accessible.
The most illuminating story about the power of extracurricular activities is told by Jamie. She recounts her experience playing the piano and doubting her aspirations because she did not consider herself a “worthy musician” after many years of practice:

I thought I’m never going to be that good, I wanted to be a concert pianist, and you know I realized I practiced and practiced, but I didn’t have private instruction. I always just sat in the back, never asked questions, I was really shy, it was a big class and I didn’t even have a full length piano until maybe high school, I always had this tiny keyboard because we couldn’t afford it.

Although Jamie was dedicated to playing the piano, her lack of resources placed a powerful constraint within her habitus and pushed her to downgrade her aspirations. Without private instruction and a real piano to practice on, she perceived that she did not have the capital required to reach her goals. She recalls her doubts when she first entered a prestigious music program:

After I got into the program—before then, I didn’t think of myself as a worthy musician because I had never had private instruction on piano and I was barely learning cello and I thought you know, ‘what am I doing… there’s no way, there’s no way’.

With very little capital and a habitus that had limited her aspirations and her trajectory, Jamie was hesitant to increase her aspirations still wondering if she was good enough. However, all of this changed when she became involved in the music program. She happily explained the dramatic accumulation of capital and the change in habitus that she experienced:

But then I got into the program, to my surprise, to my shock even. And, you know, I was completely immersed in music for the summers, completely, it was a legit conservatory with musicians and I loved it.

The resources that Jamie gained access to shocked and inspired her. The program challenged its students and also provided the support and encouragement students needed through private instruction and group lessons, increasing students’ portfolios of capital. This experience contributed to Jamie’s habitus as she learned that she was a real musician who was capable of
excelling in a rigorous environment. With an enlightened habitus and a portfolio full of capital, Jamie’s trajectory was lifted to a new level.

Unfortunately, most students did not find scholarship programs and accessing extracurricular activities was a frequent concern for students with limited economic resources. Even small expenses such as club dues proved problematic for some interviewees. Claire commented on how financial concerns limited her participation:

Yeah, there were times when I couldn’t go to certain activities because I couldn’t afford like the fee for it... and that was difficult because doing a lot of activities—you know like they were usually academic activities—I really struggled participating in, so that was definitely a factor. And a lot of that happened for clubs because every club had fees and dues and it was difficult to come up with $20 for every club.

While Claire wanted to participate in a wide range of academic clubs, the dues added up and became a burden for her family. These constraints limited the amount of capital she was able to accumulate and also contributed to her evolving habitus that incorporated a sense of constraint and frustration into her attitude towards school. Other interviewees faced similar difficulties in university as well when they want to take advantage of opportunities and explore career options. Kim talked about the struggle her family experienced when she completed an unpaid summer internship:

You know, I’ve heard through doing multiple kinds of diversity things where people very easily say, ‘oh, everyone’s on the same playing field because we’re all at [Sample College].’ And to say the some ways is that well people still have their experiences and people can make certain sacrifices that others can’t. Some people can take an unpaid internship and others can’t. I did this summer and it was terrible. My mother couldn’t support me the way I need to and I could barely support myself the way I needed to and I went through like depression and just a lot of sadness. And the internship didn’t really come out to be the way I wanted it to so there were just two things that just kept failing.

While Kim was capable and committed to her internship, her lack of resources constrained her experience and actually had serious psychological repercussions. This constraint was incorporated into her habitus as she now knows that she cannot pursue unpaid internships. This
situation also constrains Kim’s future accumulation of capital as she has to limit her choices to paid internships, opportunities that are extremely rare today.

Several interviewees discussed methods that they used to circumvent the challenges that accompanied having access to a limited income. Kayla’s family did this by signing up for scholarships to go on field trips:

I mean when it would come to field trip, I would always go on field trips but that’s because my mom would always apply to scholarships. I never paid full price for anything because one we could not afford it and two my mom was very adamant about me doing things but being able to do them on scholarship. So I was able to participate in a lot of things that if I didn’t get scholarships I wouldn’t have been able to like a lot of my friends didn’t go on field trips because they couldn’t afford it but I applied for scholarships so I could.

Kayla’s mother relied heavily on her own cultural capital to navigate the educational system and find scholarships for activities. While these were available to all low-income students, parents or students needed to know where to go and who to talk to in order to take advantage of them. Kayla’s mother pushed Kayla to reach out for scholarships because she knew that field trips and school activities would add capital to her children’s portfolios and contribute to a habitus geared towards learning and education.

Activities play an important role in the development of students’ portfolios of capital by providing valuable skills and experiences. These diverse forms of capital became engrained in the habitus, developing positive dispositions towards fields and future aspirations and opportunities. Unfortunately, socioeconomic status often inhibits students from participating when they cannot access the resources they need to compensate for their limited economic capital.
AFTER HIGH SCHOOL

When students plan for their next step after high school, they have many options. There are different ways to pursue higher education as well as jobs that begin directly after high school. Up to this point, students have been actively developing a habitus that has been shaped by family, school, and a portfolio of capital that they have also accumulated. This suggests that students will look for a field in which they are comfortable and is favorably disposed to their habitus. Therefore, students who develop a habitus geared toward educational success and high aspirations will look for a field in which this habitus will enjoy many of the same features that contributed to its formation including challenging coursework and plentiful academic opportunities.

My analysis has explored several major factors that contribute to education and help to shape students’ habitus. By developing an academically driven habitus, my interviewees looked for and selected a rigorous college where they could pursue the aspirations they developed while growing up. When I asked them why they chose Sample College, all of my interviewees cited similar reasons. For example, Lynn told me that she was looking for a “rigorous academic environment” and a “small school setting”. These features were noted again and again, suggesting that they are two powerful motivators that are closely linked to a specific form of habitus.

Another feature that was mentioned was “natural motivation”. I frequently heard about this concept when interviewees described their friends, but it was never so concisely said. Jenny told me that this was one of her biggest reasons for applying to Sample College:

And I would be challenged of course but a place like I would be surrounded by people who that were inspirational so it wouldn’t feel like I was working so hard to make my
own motivation. Versus just being surrounded by people that were constantly motivated so I was naturally motivated to do well.

Jenny discusses how beneficial highly motivated people are because they can inspire others to do their best. This phenomenon can be seen in high school peer groups. When a student is surrounded by highly motivated and academically driven peers, she wants to succeed too as she internalizes the norms and expectations of other students within her habitus. My interviewees were attracted to the people they met while visiting Sample College. Lauren identifies this feeling of comfort during her visit:

And then I came to [Sample College] and the women were amazing. So coming here it was like—I didn’t want to leave. I had the best conversations that I’ve ever had with women who were my age or older. And laugh and talk and play and grow.

When Lauren described her first trip to Sample College, it was clear that she experienced a strong field-habitus match as she met current and prospective students. Having a habitus that valued education and was built upon many positive academic experiences, Lauren felt at home in an academically rigorous environment. She also had a large portfolio that contained many forms of capital that she utilized as she networked and conversed with fellow students. It is clear that a student’s habitus and portfolio of capital make an immense contribution to their field selection after high school. While both low and high-income students wanted to enter an elite educational field, the tools that they used to access it varied dramatically.

Before entering university, students have to complete the rigorous admissions process which is extremely competitive at top universities and my interviewees commented on their preparation in great depth. While all students take the SATs, write essays, and send in transcripts, this process varies with socioeconomic status. High-income interviewees cited several different sources of support.
SAT tutors and prep classes were frequently mentioned as a resource that interviewees or their peers utilized. This was a tool that was only accessible to students with access to greater economic capital. Students with fewer economic resources often mentioned seeing peers use these resources yet not being able to access them themselves. Kelly recalls the prevalence of SAT tutoring at her school:

I mean, it was clear like just for like standardized test prep kind of things like where everybody was just shelling out like major amounts of cash for all those tutoring programs. I mean it was obvious that like, ‘Okay, I can’t really go to those things.’ But you know you can easily study by yourself if you put enough effort into it so.

Kelly’s parents could not afford standard prep classes, but they did reach out to their social network to find less expensive informal tutoring. Access to social capital helped Kelly’s parents compensate for their limited economic capital and by doing so they were able to help Kelly access the resources she needed to earn the best test scores. Like Kelly’s parents who used their social capital to find less expensive test preparation, parents’ social capital could also help as students wrote admissions essays. High-income students often had access to exclusive networks that could enhance their applications. For example, Nicole comments on the unique help she received:

I had plenty of people to read like my essays and portions of my application. I think when you’re talking about like advantages of socioeconomic status and school I think that was definitely one part. My dad’s friends who were on the board of Harvard admissions were able to read my essays and things like that. That’s a connection you just don’t walk into so that was kind of nice.

Connections like this are invaluable and primarily accessed through the prestigious networks developed through parents’ educations and careers. Students continue to benefit from these relationships as they begin to form their own networks and develop a habitus that includes new opportunities.
Students’ embedded capital and enrichment activities also assisted them in the college application process as they wrote about their past experiences and future aspirations. Lynn reflects on the benefits that students at her school gained from traveling saying, “Yeah, so a lot of my friends had money to travel abroad and have those experiences kind of enhance their world view and stuff, they crafted really nice essays”. When I inquired into the benefits of travel, she continues on to say:

Basically it’s like [Sample College] loves it when people study abroad, it’s like you have a new view and like you see different people. So I think for the friends that were able to do that, they definitely enriched their lives and their capabilities.

Lynn believes that traveling is valuable because it builds cultural capital that students can use to enhance their lives as well as their capabilities. An explicit benefit being that students can use travel experience when writing their college application essays, bringing attention to the diverse forms of cultural capital that they have accumulated. Capital gathered through extensive traveling can also be used more broadly to enlighten education and enhance social interactions. Interestingly, travel is the first thing that Nicole, who comes from a high-income background, mentioned when talking about the activities she enjoys doing with her family:

I think I mean traveling was a huge part of that. My family can afford to do that and that’s been incredibly informative to my educational experience. I mean that’s the kind of supplement that I can’t imagine my educational experience without that so that’s a huge part.

She describes travel as an invaluable supplement to her education suggesting that it strengthens the capital she earns in the classroom with the knowledge she gains from traveling to different countries and experiencing new cultures. It is also interesting that Nicole recognizes that she can’t imagine her education without travel, highlighting how experiences become deeply woven into the habitus. She has accumulated a large portfolio of capital that is full of many forms and
volumes of capital that are intertwined with one another. While some capital comes from education in school, this is frequently built upon or augmented by external experiences.

Not surprisingly, many of these college preparation and supplemental learning resources are not available to low-income students. Julia discusses how her parents wanted to get her SAT tutoring but could not afford the cost:

Recently, I’ve been thinking about my SATs and the way that I got into [Sample College] and I feel like—because a lot of the kids, I work at [business] here and a lot of the kids that I work with have been telling me their parents are making them go to all of these SAT prep classes. They’re like sophomores in high school going—granted they’re only going once every weekend but I feel like I didn’t have the opportunity at all. I went to one SAT class and it was 60 dollars and then my parents were like ‘we really can’t afford to do another one’ and so—that was done.

While Julia’s parents wanted to help her prepare for the SATs, they simply did not have the financial resources to do so. As non-native English speakers they could not help her prepare either, leaving the registration and preparation to Julia. With no one to help her and an increasing sense of constraint and frustration, Julia ended up doing little to prepare for the SATs. This situation exemplifies how a student might diminish their aspirations as Julia shifted from aiming for top-scores to mediocre when she decided to do little preparation. She accepted that her scores would be low, and the trajectory she followed was lowered. Hannah also comments on the frustration she felt as she worked with less economic and cultural capital than her peers throughout high school and the college application process:

Educationally I still achieved more than most of my peers achieved so maybe it drove me to work harder but it was very frustrating when the other people who were valedictorian, straight A students, their parents were doctors and lawyers and they had so many resources, they could get SAT tutoring. I knew one guy who had a $200 per hour academic coach whose job was just to get him into an Ivy League school. And so, it was frustrating and as a first generation college student, the application process was much more difficult for me because I didn’t have anyone to help me with it. I guess the ways it hampered my education was not being able to have a tutor.
She explains the uneven playing field at her high school and how it frustrated her as a diligent student who didn’t have access to tutors or prep courses. While her peers used tutors and other academic resources, she was on her own. Hannah also commented that she achieved more than many of her peers. This may be explained by the capital that she accumulated by traveling with her mother and the shift in habitus that helped her aspire to an elite college.

Sometimes, low-income students even had difficulties completing the admissions requirements. Claire comments on the efforts she had to take in order to take the SAT:

I had a lot of difficulty even being able to take the SAT because my counselor, she had the fee waivers for the ACT but did not have the fee waivers for the SAT because she lost them. So yeah, that took a long time... And eventually, the counselor did not want to call College Board to ask for more fee waivers, she did not want to call them and I’m like ‘that’s your job.’

Even when schools were capable of supplying students with resources, navigation and persistence were sometimes required. Unable to pay for the test, Claire was also limited in her ability to purchase books and test prep courses. It is clear that socioeconomic status influenced the assistance students received when applying to university. Tutoring and test prep were usually reserved for students who had access to greater financial resources.

Navigating the application process was also difficult for students whose parents had not attended university. Interestingly, when this was the case, almost every interviewee noted how a family member or friend helped them through the process. For example, Anna talks about the important role her aunt played in helping her apply to college:

When I decided on colleges, I had no idea what I wanted until I sat down with my aunt and I guess she gave me a lot of options and a lot of things to think about and I liked the idea of a small liberal arts college.

She goes on to say:
Both my parents—or like mainly my mom, they didn’t go to college so they didn’t have that experience but especially on my mom’s side, everyone else went to college and kept going on and so yeah, they had that experience and she was very much into the idea of helping me since she knew mom wasn’t so familiar with that realm so she did a good job actually.

While Anna’s parents supported her educational aspirations, they did not have the cultural capital to help her navigate through the application process. In contrast, her aunt had the knowledge and experience needed to illuminate Anna’s options and determine where she would apply and how she could get in. Claire also talks about finding help when applying to college:

My step-mom actually, she is an RN right now but she got like two masters and a bachelors [degree]… She did these things—she actually knows about college whereas my mom pretends to know but she actually doesn’t know what she’s talking about so I usually turn to my step mom for help about those things.

Claire relied on her step-mother’s knowledge, a resource she found to be more useful than her mothers’ efforts to understand higher education through research rather than direct experience. While her mother tried to look up information on the internet to help Claire learn about universities and the application process, her step-mother could speak from her own experiences and offer more legitimate advice as she drew from her large portfolio of capital and the experiences engrained in her habitus.

Other students were able to compensate for lack of resources by gaining access to programs and scholarships. Kayla comments on how her trajectory was completely changed when she learned of the opportunities available to her:

When I was in middle school and high school before junior year I was pretty set on going to [University] because that’s where my mom went, they had a really good financial aid program, and I just—I felt like that was where I was going to go. Because I always had the mind that I was going to go to college because I knew that that was kind of where my personality fit and I just—I knew that that was like who I was like I’m an academic person you know and so I had that in mind.

She continues on:
But then I started, I went to a program which has changed my life. And it was sponsored by [Name] of [University]. And it was a college prep program and it, I had a personal counselor. It was for students who were on free, reduced lunch so I qualified for it so it was only for like pretty low-income students but got a lot of help with my applications and with my resume and with applying to college and learning about colleges, I would not be here without that program. And I knew that my SAT scores were not that great and they gave me that SAT prep and that’s what bumped me up to be able to apply to [college]. I just—I knew that if I wanted to go to college, I’d have to be amazing in high school so I could get a scholarship. And then [Sample College] being 100% demonstrated financial aid just completely saved me and I was just like if I can just get in, I’ll be fine.

Kayla’s experience is an excellent example of the influence of socioeconomic status on habitus and the role that outside resources can play. Kayla knew that she would not be able to attend university without significant financial aid and she had resigned herself to going to her mother’s alma mater, a well-known state school. However, attending this college program gave her the resources and cultural capital she needed to discover the other options that were available to her. In the end, she was able to access a large portfolio of capital and a habitus that had incorporated new experiences and higher aspirations.

While almost all of my respondents had some guidance through the college application process, low-income students also worried about getting into college. Hannah reflected on her lack of extracurricular activities and the damage that did to her chances of being accepted to an elite university:

Yeah, oh my God, that was probably the biggest limiting factor that I felt would be for me to get into a good college because I took the hardest classes I could, I got good grades and I got high test scores but in the admissions process there’s a big emphasis on extracurricular activities. I felt like I couldn’t do any because they’re all after school and I take the bus and my school is 6 miles so I can’t just walk. So that was a really big limiting factor for me.

With the current emphasis on well-rounded students, Hannah worried that she lacked the activities to prove that she was a worthy candidate. Even after getting accepted, challenges continued to arise especially when it came to college tuition. While some families where able to
afford their children’s top choice that was not always the case. Two interviewees were accepted at other universities and had to decline their offers because of financial aid. Hannah, who has developed a passion for politics and travel, discussed the disappointment she faced:

Well—it was a really big blow to me because I got accepted to [University], and [University], a Mecca for Foreign Service, but then I couldn’t go because of financial aid. So I think my biggest struggle will be getting those internships that are close to politics and stuff because I’m far away from the center of that.

While her top choice offered her exclusive access to many of the internship and career opportunities she would like to pursue, Hannah selected Sample College because of her mother’s limited financial resources. Hannah and her mother worked diligently to develop a habitus and a trajectory that was directed towards a top college. It is unfortunate that these efforts were not rewarded with a financially feasible option. Sarah also discusses getting into her top choice and having to decide what her family could really afford:

And the ultimate decision came down to the financial aid package. [University] was actually where I really wanted to go because I just loved it more when I went. I liked the bigger size and I liked that they had the law school but their financial aid package was dismal in comparison to [Sample College]. So that was really the ultimate decision between—they were my two best options academically and then [Sample College] was the best financially so that’s where I went.

Like Hannah, Sarah’s ultimate decision was based on financial aid and not her preference. Although Sarah’s parents were willing to try and pay for her top choice, she wanted to choose the school that would be best for her and her family. As college becomes more expensive it is not surprising that financial aid plays a crucial role in the decision process. However, none of my high-income interviewees mentioned any constraint when selecting the college they would attend. It appears as though socioeconomic status really does influence the entire college application process, sometimes shifting students’ trajectories at the very end of the process.
While I have told the story of students building a tremendous amount of capital through education and activities, this is the exception not the rule. The other path that I have noted along the way is the story of the students who are not placed in challenging courses and do not have the opportunity to work with inspirational teachers or academically driven friends. These students have developed a different type of habitus that generally leads them to “relegate themselves out of the system” and away from higher education. Lauren comments on individuals she knew that followed a different path. She suggests that this was due to them not realizing their potential:

I know some people who I think are very intelligent but I don’t think they realize their potential or came to their potential because they didn’t have full support from their family—their family didn’t understand, their family didn’t get it. Or their family thought, ‘you’re smart, you like to do things, eww, like you should like to do this, you should like to do that, you should like to play sports or whatever.’ And I know that every—when I was younger the greatest motivation was my family, to make my family proud. And to see that and even today, whenever I get a bad grade or a grade that I don’t like it’s not like—it doesn’t feel like an entire reflection of myself alone, it’s a reflection of me and my family and like letting my parents down…. Things like that, like if you have problems, if you wanted to grow, if you wanted to do and explore any intellectual aspects, family made that happen.

As a significant motivator in her life, Lauren comments on how important family is for educational success. While she focuses specifically on support, students also rely on their families’ knowledge and resources. Family plays a critical role in the development of students’ habitus and portfolios of capital and without the proper support, students face significant disadvantages in school. Even my interviewees, who benefited from support and excelled in many areas, faced dilemmas and questioned if they were good enough. Lynn comments on limiting her aspirations when she told me:

But then also I think a challenge for me is like—it’s hard for me to balance like humility, modesty, and being proud of what I do. So sometimes I think the reason why I don’t do as well as I can is that I assume it’s not going to work out so let me not try.
Even with supportive parents and teachers, and many talents to be proud of Lynn sometimes questioned her abilities and thought about giving up. This comment highlights the internal process that occurs when a student relegates themselves out of the system. A student who has learned to doubt their academic abilities may experience this worry and decide to “not try” because they believe their chance of success is low. This tendency may be increased when students do not know how they measure up against the competition. For low-income students, simply determining where to place one’s self could be a challenge. Jenny remembers the difficulties she faced as she completed the college application process:

So I procrastinated a lot because I didn’t know where to place myself. I didn’t know, not just what I deserved but like where I was as to compared to other people... I didn’t know where I was on that scale and I didn’t know if I was dreaming in the clouds kind of thing so I think that was very challenging. I mean that’s a common stress, not knowing if you’re good enough. But I know that that was a hard.

While many high-income students knew they were headed to top tier institutions, these aspirations were based on family knowledge and expectations, a resource that low-income students often did not have access to. Jenny completed her applications on her own and she wondered where she fit in. She had gathered a strong portfolio of capital and yet she had difficulty determining her “place in the world” and wondered if her goals were too lofty. Another example of when students doubt themselves is when they are not given the proper tools. Students may presume that their abilities are the problem rather than another factor such as a learning disorder. Meghan reflects on how her Attention Deficit Disorder influenced her education:

Especially in regards to mathematics because I had always thought I just couldn’t do math. And then when I got to college I was like ‘wait, I can, I just haven’t had the time to focus on it yet.’

With an undiagnosed learning disorder, Meghan had assumed that her natural ability was the problem. This perception was engrained into Meghan’s habitus and she accepted that she could
not do math until she received the proper medical treatment and realized that the problem had nothing to do with her abilities. This conclusion highlights the tendency for students to blame themselves rather than structural barriers that may hinder their success.

**A MODEL OF CHRONOLOGICAL EXPOSURE TO FIELDS AND ACCUMULATION OF CAPITAL**

It is clear that socioeconomic status greatly influences the college application process. High-income students access a wide variety of resources when applying to college while low-income students are often required to be resourceful or complete the process independently. That being said, almost all of my interviewees cited a parent, relative, or teacher who was able to help them through the application process.

Figure 5 illustrates the complex processes that were presented in this chapter. High-income students frequently follow the highest trajectory (A) because they are able to access valuable resources at each stage of life. For instance, their parents are able to pass on social and cultural capital, they are able to navigate to advanced classes, and they use economic capital to take advantage of extracurricular activities. This process leads to the development of a large and diverse portfolio of capital and a habitus that is geared towards educational norms and academic success, creating a field-habitus match.

At the other extreme there are low-income students who have access to too few resources and accumulate little capital during their education. They do not acquire the knowledge and skills they need at home and they are unable to navigate to top courses where the best teachers and resources are available. Through this process they meet peers who share a common experience and they may engage in withdrawal, subgroups, or deviant groups. Finally, they experience little engagement in extracurricular activities because of limited economic and time
resources. This situation creates a field-habitus clash and leads to a trajectory (C and D) where students reject school norms and subsequently experience educational failure.

Finally, there are also students who follow a trajectory (B) that is influenced by socioeconomic disadvantages and yet finds the resources necessary for educational success. Students who follow this trajectory, the primary subjects of my analysis, rely on informal forms of capital their families pass on as well as characteristics such as resourcefulness and risk taking. These students rely heavily on teachers and peers to gain the knowledge and capital that high-income students often acquire at home. While they face set-backs throughout their education, these students find and capitalize on the resources available to them in order to achieve academic success.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

This thesis was inspired by the hypothesis that low-income students experience significant barriers to learning and education policy fails to address the socioeconomic disadvantages, informal education, and powerful social factors that greatly influence students’ academic success. The literature on education and policy suggests that this is the case, documenting a wide array of socioeconomic disadvantages that are rarely eliminated by current policy. Focusing on inclusionary policy allowed me to assess the most comprehensive tool available to policymakers to increase educational opportunities. Previous research documented additional problems that arose as a result of inclusionary policy and its limited influence on academic achievement. The complexities of the education process inspired a theoretical model that incorporated the social world into student trajectories and could trace their educational experiences to corresponding outcomes.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts of field, capital, and habitus were used to establish a methodical understanding of the student experience, incorporating the internal and the external, as well as a temporal element, to include the student’s experiences and memories into one dynamic being. Because these three concepts are so tightly interwoven, they are understood together and are used to trace the student experience.

In order to understand the low-income student’s experience of inclusionary policy, it was also necessary to identity the different trajectories she may follow. The concepts conformity and rejection allowed me to create a spectrum in which I could study the student’s interaction with her new field, a high-income school. Experiences within the new field would contribute to the
development of the student habitus and a trajectory which would eventually lead to the student’s conformity to or rejection of the school’s norms.

In order to learn more about the low-income student experience in a high-income educational environment, I collected and analyzed 20 qualitative interviews from current college students. Guided by an interview schedule that inquired about family, friends, school, and activities, I developed a strong understanding of the formal and informal social factors that contribute to educational success. Talking to students from a variety of socioeconomic and racial backgrounds helped me identify many diverse experiences and patterns. In short, successful low-income students relied upon a wide variety of formal and informal resources so that they could take advantage of the opportunities available to them by gaining access to advanced coursework and extracurricular activities. These experiences allowed them to build large portfolios of capital and develop habitus that placed them on a trajectory to educational success. These initial findings can be used to inform comprehensive education policy that increases educational opportunities for all students.

Education policy that addresses disparities in educational attainment must focus on the root causes of socioeconomic disadvantage and educational failure. Two primary suggestions for decreasing socioeconomic disadvantage include greater access to medical care and greater financial security for families. Educational failure may also be reduced by increasing access to resources, activities, and better course curriculums.

It is also important to give low-income parents access to the resources they need to help their children attain academic success including economic capital, knowledge, and time resources. The education system requires an extraordinary amount of knowledge to navigate it successfully. Greater access to extracurricular activities will allow students to build large
portfolios of capital, explore their interests, and develop a habitus of opportunity rather than constraint. Finally, the tracking system appears to divide students into two very different groups and students placed in regular classes are offered little challenge. Revision of the course curriculum will offer all students challenging coursework at the appropriate level to keep them engaged in school.

While Americans continue to believe in the achievement ideology, my analysis suggests that there are many barriers to learning that low-income students must overcome. In fact, placement in a high-performing school is only the first step toward achieving academic success. Students from low-income backgrounds must rely on a wide range of informal learning experiences in order to compete with high-income peers. Families that value and promote education help students build an education oriented habitus. However, students also need help navigating the educational system so that they can take rewarding courses and interact with teachers and peers who will provide them with the additional knowledge and capital they need to succeed. Therefore, policymakers must address the formal and informal processes of schooling and identify the diverse resources that contribute to educational attainment in order to create comprehensive educational policy that gives all students access to educational opportunity.
Appendix

RESPONDENT SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in my survey. In order to collect a representative sample, I must collect responses from a variety of different students.

Depending on your responses, you may or may not be eligible to participate.

Please fill out the following questions:

High School Location (City, State):
Did you attend public or private high school:
High School Socioeconomic status:
(upper, middle, working-class, etc.)
Race/Ethnicity:
Religion:
Socioeconomic status:
(On a scale from 1-10, where do you fall on the income distribution)

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

FAMILY: Describe your family in one or two sentences?
Parental marital status, education level, occupation, single or dual earner household:
Number of siblings, current endeavors:
Did you family do activities together? On a daily basis?
Were your parents involved in your education?
Did you have any health concerns during high school?

Student-Student Relationships
How/Where did you meet your friends? Is this how most students made friends?
What features/interests you have in common with your friends?
What are they doing now?
Demographic Features:
- Racial composition of the school? - What race do you identify as?
- Do you think race impacts educational experience?
- Religious composition of the school? What religion do you identify with?
- Do you think religion impacts educational experience?
- Socioeconomic composition of the school? What category do you identify with?
- Do you think SES impacts educational experience?
HIGH SCHOOL: Advice for a new student?
- How do students typically dress? Do a lot of students have cars, electronics?
- What is the best method for fitting in? Why might a student not fit in?
- What types of pressures did students face? Did you feel as though you faced these?

Field – School
What did you like about school?
What did you not like about school?

What levels of classes were offered? What types of students were in each level?
What level of classes did you take? (What motivated you?)
Did you enjoy your coursework?

Student-Teacher Relationships
Did you have a favorite teacher? Why was s/he your favorite?
Did you have a least favorite teacher? Why is s/he your least favorite?

Extracurricular Activities: What motivated you?
Were you a member of any clubs or sports teams? Was that the norm?
How do you spend your time outside of the classroom? Lessons, clubs, church, etc
Do you have a job? Where? How many hours per week do you work?

POST HS:
What different paths do students take after graduation? (expected) career aspirations?
During high school, what were your plans for after graduation?
What did your teachers think you should do after high school?
What are your parents’ expectations for your education? Your future career?

If College – College Preparation/ Application Process: How did you prepare?
What did you do to prepare for the SAT/ACT?
How many schools did you apply to? How many did you visit?
Why did you choose Wellesley?

Personal Aspirations
When you were very little, what where your aspirations?
What are you currently doing? What are your aspirations today? Have they changed?
What support have you gotten? What challenges do you face?
If there was one major factor in your academic success, what is it?
If I remember one thing, what should it be?
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