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Living Simultaneously in Two Different Worlds

Citation

<u>Living Simultaneously in Two Different Worlds</u>

<u>An Honors Thesis by Martina Albin</u>

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<u>Abstract</u>

Black students who attend predominantly white institutions before college have a complex educational experience because of the systematically racist practices that are in place within the American school system – students' lives and identities are complicated as they try to get an education. This study focuses on the elite preparatory school environment (places that have been historically for the rich and white), where many Black students integrate into. First, this paper investigates the historical precedents that are the consequence of an unfair and unequal education system. Then, through a series of interviews with Black alumni of prestigious secondary schools this study explores the lives Black students experienced. This research paper examines the contrasting and contradictory environments the students live in, showing how it infers with Black students' educational journey. This research moves past simplistic narratives of racial trauma and disadvantages, instead it analyzes the agency these students have and the ways they navigate these spaces emotionally and strategically.

<u>Introduction</u>

When I graduated from my private school in Massachusetts, Newton Country Day School (NCDS), it never occurred to me to truly think about the person I had evolved into after my seven years there. As I walked through the hallways of my school, engaged with my peers and teachers, because I was living it, I never had the opportunity to truly comprehend what it meant to be a Black student in the American education system.

During the 4th grade, my homeroom teacher (and afterschool program director)[1] nominated me to apply for Steppingstone Scholars Foundation, where I had the opportunity of a lifetime as a low-income Black child to attend an elite school and receive a great education. Steppingstone's goals are to help, what tends to be minoritized and low socioeconomic status, students with academic, advising and emotional support while attending schools that will "lead to college" (Steppingstone Scholars, n.d.). After the nominations, I proceeded to apply, be interviewed and get accepted to the program. Then, I experienced around 13 months of extra schooling to prepare for private (or independent) schools. Steppingstone provided assistance during the application process for the private schools and with financial aid so my parents could afford a wealthier school.

When I got accepted into Steppingstone, I did cartwheels. Subsequently, when I found out I got accepted into NCDS (which was the only private school I was accepted into, as I was waitlisted at the others), I jumped up and down in my living room. In all honesty, as I went through this process, I did not think about the implications of what I was doing. All I knew was that college would be essential for a future of economic freedom that my parents wanted for me. So, I was excited about these accomplishments because, by participating in Steppingstone and getting accepted into NCDS, I knew they were the building blocks for that goal.

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[1] I was nominated by two different people to apply for Steppingstone.

Founded in 1880, from first glance as a 10-year-old, NCDS resembled a castle or a fancy palace that I was only used to seeing in movies. Immediately, as I opened the front doors of NCDS, I saw a grand curved double staircase at the entrance and an elegant glass room located to the left. My previous school, Charles H. Taylor Elementary School (located in the predominantly Black neighborhood of Mattapan, in Boston), felt much smaller with limited resources – so constrained, that the library, gym and technology center were forced into one room. It was almost unbelievable for me, coming from that background, to walk through the hallways of this new school and become a student. It was a school that had two different libraries, multiple theaters, gym, fitness center, dance studio and more. As soon as I saw it, it became my dream school. So, I walked in as a bright-eyed child, full of excitement, and eager to learn but left with the burden of feeling unsure of myself, questioning my identity, experiencing social anxiety, and having suppressed memories.

There are so many moments that I could recall, for you, as the reader, to understand the challenges and complex situations that I was forced to navigate. However, I think it's easier to describe the beginning. I started NCDS as a sixth grader. In my sixth-grade class, there were approximately 30 students, with only six of us being children of color; two were half white and Asian, one was Asian, one was an Indian, and two of us were Black and Haitian. My childhood best friend, Samantha, and I went through the same elementary school, then proceeded to do Steppingstone together and NCDS together. Unfortunately, during that first year, it felt like we rarely saw each other. We did not have any classes together and we were never able to sit at lunch together. At lunch we had assigned tables, and one time, our assigned tables were near each other, so we set our trays down at the corner of our tables so we could be closer to each other. However, our middle school principal purposely moved my lunch tray, so we would not be

able to interact. I believe he thought he was doing what was "right" for us to integrate into our grade more. Even so, not only did I have to navigate this new environment and be around a community of peers who lived completely different lives, it was difficult not being able to find solace in my own friend during school hours.

Regardless of those challenges, what will always stick to me during the first couple weeks at my new school was the first time I felt the fear of being judged. It was the first lunch at NCDS. Coming from Boston public schools, where the only meal option never looked appetizing, Samantha and I were so excited about our new lunch options. There was the main bar with the hot meal (which changed every day), a salad bar, sandwich bar, panini press, and more drink options than just milk: we wanted everything. So, that's what we did. I got the hot meal, made a sandwich, made a salad, got a juice, and sat down at my new assigned table. It was too much food for a sixth grader, and I doubt I ate all of it, but I was unbelievably happy. Till this day, though, I will never forget the look on my classmate's face when she looked at my tray and then me; it was a look, at least what I interpreted it as, of disgust and judgment. Though I did not comprehend it at the time, this was the first time I felt the "otherness" and "outsider" feeling that I would soon learn would not go away.

Finally, as I entered college at Lehigh University in the fall of 2020 and left that space, I was able to reflect and had the ability to truly understand my experiences at school. I pondered through many questions: Why did I have to be taken out of my neighborhood with my peers and put into this complicated environment? Why was I "chosen" to do so? Why was it difficult to build connections with my white peers? Why was I never truly comfortable and felt isolated? And more importantly, what about the other Black students? Did they go through similar

struggles? If so, how, and why did we survive our preparatory schools? These observations and curiosities prompted me to complete this study that tries to analyze and answer these questions.

Research (Persell & Cookson, 1991) has shown that Black students attending predominantly white preparatory schools have divergent educational experiences compared to their white counterparts. Throughout the history of American education, elite schools were created for (and catered exclusively to) the white and upper class, establishing a homogeneous atmosphere that excluded minorities, specifically Black students (Persell & Cookson, 1991). This is due to a variety of factors, such as segregation, class differences, and blatant racism (Williams, 2007). In 1954 the United States decided "separate but equal," the doctrine that had provisioned for racial educational apartheid for almost sixty years, was "inherently unequal" and reversed it with the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. Though this was the right move in the next steps for a future of equity and equality in America, it was not easy to remove the influence of segregation, class, and racism. The larger structure of these issues continued to impact society and education.

Historically, education has served as the necessary means for achieving a successful future as an American; in March 2021, 86% of adults who had jobs between 25-34 were people with college degrees (Nietzel, 2022). Over a lifetime, men with college degrees make $900,000 more than men without; while women earn $630,000 more compared to women without college degrees (Education and Lifetime, 2015). However, even after *Brown*, American schools throughout the 20th and 21st century were persistently segregated (Lombardo, 2019). Schools located in low-income, and majority minority neighborhoods were undervalued and underfunded (Lombardo, 2019). This continuously limited the futures Black and minority students could envision and will themselves into.

In the recent decades, many elite institutions have elected to bring minority students into their classrooms to compensate for systematic racial inequalities that America created. In *The Independent School* magazine in 2000 Al Adams, head of Lick-Wilmerding School in San Francisco, wrote, "given the societal turf independent schools occupy, the considerable resources they command, and the powerful network of caring and influential people they attract, independent schools have the opportunity–and, I believe, obligation–to do more than educate 1.5 percent of our nation's children exceptionally well" (Brosnan, 2001).

Besides institutions' direct actions, Black students would attend these schools with help from programs, such as Steppingstone Scholars Foundation and Prep for Prep, or through a family's own initiative to afford excessive tuitions, such as the current yearly rate, $64,075, at NCDS. Regardless of how they arrive, American society believes there is a value for students to attending elite preparatory schools.

Though many of these schools claim to value diversity and inclusion, they fail to realize that providing access is only the first step to an equal education system (Jack, 2019). Many Black students at these schools, "describe feeling like a guest at someone's house: you can stay and look, but you don't belong" (Anderson, 2012). Their experiences go beyond blatant inequality and microaggressions; rather, students "describe a racism that materializes not in insults, but more often in polite indifference, silence and segregation" (Anderson, 2012).

Remarkably, even with these issues, Black students go to class, build relationships, play sports, participate in extracurricular activities, and ultimately graduate from these institutions. So, even with the challenges and disadvantages they face, they find ways through resilience and self-reliance to motivate themselves to stay.

This study examines these environments and learns how Black students navigate through institutions that were not created for them. Past research (Anderson, 2012; Ohrstrom, 2021) on this topic primarily focuses on stories of victimization and trauma. Though important and needs to be spoken on, this study plans to tell the holistic narratives of these students' lives and bring their stories together more cohesively. It comprehensively analyzes the double lives these students form and questions how their race, class, identity, gender, and opportunity were affected and evolved in these spaces. This research demonstrates the problems with integration and why Black students often go through similar repeated patterns of racial trauma, exclusion, and the building of resilience, even when at different institutions. Then explains how Black students complicate our understanding of these schools as their presence affects the atmosphere between their peers, administrators, families, and other surrounding counterparts.

This study accomplished this through 15 semi-structured interviews with Black graduates of predominantly white preparatory schools. In these interviews it was revealed how students use their agency as they maneuvered their way through these classrooms emotionally, strategically, and physically. Black students learned to cope and rely within peer groups who looked like them and shared similar backgrounds. They found the ability to work through any challenges and contradictions they faced because of the educational experience they were promised would benefit them in the future. The adolescents learned how to operate in the world of the white and wealthy while, sometimes, going back home to contradictory lifestyles. Black students were forced to learn how to create spaces for themselves and educate others, as reliance on faculty was limited. In addition, they battled through identity crises while trying to conform to their environments and balancing their authentic self. Ultimately, these conversations sparked ideas of

what can be applied to future educational policies to create better environments for Black students to grow and succeed.

Literature Review

Historical Frame

The American education system was created because the founders wanted Americans to be able to "participate in civic life, vote wisely, [and] protect their rights and freedoms" (Kober, n.d.). Educated Americans had the ability to "carry out tasks that require literacy and critical thinking" (Radcliffe, 2023) which would allow for more jobs and "thereby strengthen the nation's economic position" (Kober, n.d.). As the American dream was enmeshed with materialistic wealth, to achieve monetary assets many Americans valued an education (High, 2015). However, African Americans were strategically and systematically denied access to education and thus denied access to full participation in American citizenship.

The discussion of what it means to be a Black American and receive an education is not new. African Americans sought to be educated because it served as "a fundamental way to resist every strategy of white racist colonization" (hooks, 1994, p. 2). This is why during reconstruction, African Americans had to support themselves by building their own schools and teaching within them. Most of the time it was self-taught African American missionaries and educators teaching others; consequently, this created another financial burden for a community only recently removed from enslavement (Williams, 2007). Mirroring the realities of the enmeshment of segregation and wealth inequality today, even then centuries of racial wealth accumulation impacted education in so many ways.

Scholars wondered if and how could the African American population move past centuries of disadvantages that have been placed on them. Du Bois (1903) speaks about this idea

of the talented tenth; ten percent of the African American population have the ability and skills to rise above. He believed that "the Negro race, like all other races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men," and education for this selected group was the key to this. Du Bois spoke on this idea in the early 1900s, when most schools for African Americans were teaching elementary school work or at best high school material. He argues that if there is this so-called ten percent of the Black community who will rise above, due to the unfairness instilled for hundreds of years, there is a dire need to identify these students and give them the opportunity for the best education out there; so, a small number of Black students would be identified as possessing the innate potential for individual success and it was their educators' job to do everything possible not to waste their "excellence." This is not only a problem for the African American community but for all Americans, as Du Bois explains, "Here is a race transplanted through the criminal foolishness of your fathers… if you do not lift them up, they will pull you down."

Programs today like Steppingstone Scholars – which identify "gifted and talented" minority students and facilitate resources to allow them to tap into their purported exceptional status – are effectively carrying out Du Bois's argument. Thereby, these students carry the burden of being exemplary students of their race. This hundred-year-old-framework explains some of the challenges and complications contemporary students face. According to scholar Ogbu (Ogbu, 2004 cited in Ford et al., 2008), members of the African American community may engage in "secondary resistance", where individuals may have "low commitment to values and beliefs that are considered typical of mainstream Whites or those who have been their oppressors." Many Black adolescents associate "acting white with getting good grades [and] being intelligent" subsequently, high-achieving Black students may be seen as "betrayers" or "adopting the behaviors of the enemy."

Excellence

Scholars (Vilanova, 2020; Ferguson, 2012) have written about the mid-20th-century popularity of "excellence," a floating signifier that became the rhetorical explanation for education policy that was designed to support, supposedly, exceptional students who were said to be born to outstrip their peers and larger status. Vilanova argues that white supremacy and excellence are interrelated. Racism, "is not just discrimination and a denial of Black people's ability to attain equality," he writes "[I]t is also the processes, discourses, and arguments by which white culture and productions are marked as exceptional."

In my work, "excellence" is defined as the perceived ability to achieve greatness in an American society; this "greatness" is linked to having opportunities to secure the American dream which is rooted in wealth and education. For white Americans they are taught that they are "excellent" because of their racial superiority. Conversely, Black Americans are not deemed "excellent" so, with this instilled mindset, how are they ever going to assimilate into this culture? They are not white and will never be white. Simply, these "standards of excellence" were ways to create more racial separation (Vilanova, 2020). In many ways, "excellence," which became an important term in the U. S. Department of Education in the wake of *Brown v. Board of Education,* was the rhetorical way the nation accepted Du Bois's ideas.

In addition, there are voluntary and involuntary minoritized groups in America, which is represented by the pool of participants, where this conception of "excellence" affects both groups in similar ways (Ford et al., 2008). In my study, the voluntary minorities are those whose families immigrated to America, from regions such as the Caribbean and or continents such as Africa, for a "myriad of reasons"; whereas involuntary minorities are African Americans, who are the descendants of the people who were forced to come here. It is imperative to highlight that

although immigrated Black Americans may not be descendants of American slavery and white supremacy, they are Black and live in America, so they still encounter the effects of racism in their daily lives, especially in this case of education.

American society is rooted in racism, and has created this racial caste system, that regardless of whether your bloodline is from America or not, opportunities will be stripped away and harder to achieve simply because of the color of one's skin. In particular, as many Black voluntary immigrants move for better opportunities and seek American prosperities, they are confronted with more hurdles because of the structures of white supremacy. For instance, many neighborhoods are racially segregated (because of the lasting effects of residential legislation), thus, not surprisingly, many immigrated families of my participants lived in predominantly Black neighborhoods, where African Americans and Black immigrants live together. As housing segregation is interconnected to the school's Black students attend, inevitably, many Black immigrants experience the same systematic educational disadvantages as the African American community. Ultimately, these communities are forced to come to the realization that being Black is the primary factor blocking them from this perceived "excellence" to a fair educational experience.

Being an "American"

These frames place historic and profound pressures on "exceptional" Black students, who are in essence told that they have a chance to achieve a rare proximity to whiteness and its privileges. This mirrors *The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain*, where Hughes argues that a "mountain [is] standing in the way of any true Negro art in America—this urge within the race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible" (Hughes, 1995).

Hughes is writing about art, specifically, but it is fair to conclude this same challenge is true of education and the opportunities it affords: Black citizens are trying to build a future for themselves on the grounds of being an American. To survive in the American capitalistic society, individuals must gain a position where they make enough money, and the higher paying positions go to the more educated.

This paper argues that being an "American" is someone who receives a proper education for a future of economic freedom. Fulfilling this goal is a way to blend within the society, thereby "earning" the title of an "American." So, to do so one must seek to be educated; nonetheless, though students can receive an education wherever they are in America, not all schools have the same resources. Hence, the systematically racist barriers to achieving a sufficient education are connected to the second-class "citizenship" that Black Americans may feel. Black students integrate into predominantly white schools for better access to education and to build themselves up against the racial pressures (*Reconstructing Citizenship*, n.d.). By doing so, Black students are molding themselves into the social structures that White men created.

Hughes speaks on whether it's truly worth it for Black people to mold themselves and assimilate into the culture of the white people; especially if it's at a loss of their own cultural identity. Du Bois describes this as double consciousness (2018). He explains that "all of these opportunities were theirs, not mine" so Black people must learn to navigate a society that was created on the dehumanization of their people. Therefore, trying to merge those two identities of being Black and an American creates an internal conflict for Black Americans.

Modern Day Frame

One of the primary crucibles for this conflict where Black students confront the complexities of citizenship, belonging, and exceptionalism is the elite private preparatory school.

Not surprisingly, since most of these schools tend to be predominately white, life at these schools is not easy for Black students. Many scholars (Ohrstrom, 2021; Anderson, 2012; Sullivan, 2020) have spoken about these negative and unfortunate experiences that minority students face. Ohrstrom and Sullivan demonstrate that there are social media accounts where Black students speak about their experiences at predominantly white institutions; these experiences the students describe on the social media platform are problems that are ever occurring and repeating – many minoritized students can relate. It is the built up of direct racism, microaggressions, ideas of white superiority, class differences and the struggle of cultural identity that students face at these schools which leads to isolation, loneliness, and can be detrimental to Black students mental and physical health.

For instance, in *American Promise*, a documentary film which follows two African Americans at an elite school in New York, teachers set expectations and limitations on these boys because of their race (Brewster & Stephenson, 2013). In Beverly Tatum's book (1997), she describes that when a child wanted to be a lawyer, a school official said, "that is no realistic goal for a nigger" (p. 166). So, it is quite difficult for these students to find a place for themselves at these schools.

Due to their experiences, scholars (Jack, 2019; Persell & Cookson, 1991) argue that Black students feel as if they are an outsider and a guest within their own schools. Low-income students can be identified as the privileged poor (Jack, 2019); these students do not come from wealthy backgrounds, but they attend a school, where their peers can travel, spend and indulge without a second thought. The privileged poor feel privileged because of the schools they attend but as soon as they go home it's a different life. Consequently, students must carry the "burden of acting upper class" and "acting white" (Persell & Cookson, 1991).

Colleges are praised for creating policies that allow for more minority students to enroll, however, they fail to realize that integration is not enough because "these campuses are still bastions of wealth, built on the customs, traditions, and policies that reflect the tastes and habits of the rich" (Jack, 2019). This is because "having access is not inclusion" and it's time for predominantly white institutions to realize this (Jack, 2019).

Understanding the difficulty of Black students at these schools is important but this paper plans to move beyond the simplicity of that. For example, Datnow and Cooper (1996) explain that Black children attribute educational achievements as a "white prerogative." Thus, Persell and Cookson (1991) argue that Black students need to have "self-reliance and ambition" to motivate themselves to do academically well in these spaces.

Furthermore, in *American Promise*, one of the students ends up leaving the elite school for a high school in his neighborhood, however, the other student stays. That student's friend group, when shown in the movie, were mostly other peers of color (Brewster & Stephenson, 2013). This is one of the ways, Black students navigate these schools by having what scholar Carter (2007) called counter spaces. A space where students "affirm the racial and/or ethnic aspects of their identity," as they get the "necessary psychological, social, and cultural support" that they use to cope with the "alienation and otherness" they experience. This research demonstrates that these are only a few of the many ways Black students cope and interact within their school environments.

Methods

This research focuses on presenting a representation of Black students that encompasses all their experiences, rather than the dominant media narratives that either downplay or only highlight the struggles Black people experience. To do so, the methodologies of this study were

based on qualitative research, where the data is solely acquired from the interviews with participants, which provided better results for a complex study such as this one. This type of study excels with interviews because of the intricate questions I posed towards the subjects; unlike a survey, to build the narratives and to tell the participant's stories holistically, I needed the ability to converse with my participants (DeCarlo, 2018). This allowed me to get more specific into the situations and topics my interviewees spoke on to get the full picture of who the former students were at their school and humanize their journeys. Then, the data analysis served as the place for me to create my own theories and conclusions about the Black student experience ("Grounded Theory," 2021).

To acquire an authentic and comprehensive representation of my participants the interview questions were focused on all areas of school life: such as, identity problems within themselves and/or surroundings, academics, social life, extracurricular activities, relationships with teachers and peers, socioeconomic status, handling of the college application process, diversity clubs, and more. I focused on learning who the former students were before they attended their preparatory schools and then explored their journey from the beginning to their last year there. To not let any preconceived notions control my data, questions were intentionally crafted to be broad to let my participants lead the conversation.

Moreover, as interviews went on, I received a wide range of responses, because the alumni prioritized different aspects of their experiences. I asked questions such as "Overall, how was your academic experience?" and "What relationships did you have with your peers, and other students?" Other questions were "Did you ever feel like your socioeconomic status affected your school experience?" and "Given your whole experience and the knowledge you know now, if you could go back in time, would you do it all over again?" From the answers provided, name,

location, school (and how long they attended the school), ethno-racial self-identification/identity, and age were the identifiers collected from each participant.

Many scholars (Irvine et al, 2012, for instance) argue for the importance of in person interviews. For this reason–and to make the subjects more comfortable–I prioritized in-person interviews. Conversations occurred in participants' respective locations and at a public place of their choice because face-to-face atmospheres, instead of speaking through technology, allow for more connection between me and the participants; there are levels of vulnerability that are not easily accessible when speaking with someone from a distance. In-person conversation allows for the best "natural conversation" as dialogues such as small talk and jokes flow more naturally. Consequently, more "character" and "humanity" can be seen from participants which creates a better story to be expressed in this paper. In addition, recognizing nonverbal cues is more challenging with technology; given the complicated information being discussed, it was important to be able to understand and/or see when to move on from more sensitive topics (Irvine et al., 2012).

This study presented a minor increase over minimal risk because of the difficult content that the conversations brought up. With this type of research, to seek the authentic stories subjects were questioned about past experiences that "may [have] caused the participant to re-live their distress" (Conolly et al., 2023). As a journalist who is speaking with "people who have experienced harm," I needed to understand my position as an interviewer to not have the "extractive" relationship that can emerge during journalistic reporting (Yahr, n.d.). This is why it was important to try to reduce this risk to the participants as much as possible. To do so, I followed different practices to take care of the well-being of my participants.

First, all participants read through a consent document to understand what would be expected of them during the interview. The form highlighted the major points of this research and what identifiers I would ask from them. I ensured participants fully comprehended those details and answered all questions before proceeding. Participants were then allowed to choose where they would like the interview location to be held to have maximum comfortability. Participants had control of where they wanted the conversation to go and during any moment participants could have stopped or moved onto another topic. Participants were offered the ability to use pseudonyms and/or remove any of their identifying information; these were handled on a case-by-case basis, with some, for instance, asking for their school's name to not be identified.

In addition, though it is important to remain neutral as a journalist, some scholars argue that "you can be biased in seeing inequity or harm…[as] not acceptable" (Yahr, n.d.). Thus, as a student who had gone through similar experiences as my participants, it was important for me to speak about my own feelings during the conversations. This allowed participants to see the commonality between us, which visibly lessened the power imbalance of being the interviewer. Though the project brought more risk than minimal, I believe that because of the importance of this topic and the difference it could make in lessening educational inequalities it allowed participants to be more willing to share their stories.

The Pool of Participants

This study consisted of 15 semi-structured interviews with Black graduates of predominantly white preparatory schools. The qualifications to participate were that students must identify as Black and have attended a preparatory school during their secondary education.

The sample was acquired from a combination of sampling techniques, including my own peer networks and through social networking sites such as LinkedIn and Instagram.

The participant sample was 13 women and two men. All interviewees identified as Black, however their ethnicities varied; for instance, students had American, Caribbean, African or other backgrounds. All schools were in the northeast U. S.; eight participants were alumni from schools in Massachusetts while the rest were from schools in New Jersey (2), New York (3), Connecticut (1) and one school where the location is hidden as a request from the participant. Black students do not have identical experiences, however, because of the systematic racial issues in America, the "common challenges [they face] in turn result in recurring patterns of experiences for individual group members" (Hill Collins, 2002). Thus, though this study focuses on the northeast, the Black student experience can be spoken about in a larger context because of the similarities in their lives.

All schools had remarkable campuses with expensive facilities and buildings, rigorous academics, various extracurriculars, and plenty of opportunities for students to explore themselves. Student bodies ranged from 300 to over 1,000 students, with the latter numbers coming from schools with multiple grade levels. Annual cost of tuition, without the extra fees, spanned from $38,000 to over $77,000, with those on the more expensive side often including boarding. Overall diversity of students of color from these preparatory schools ranged from 15% to 50% of the student body.

A majority of the surveyed former students either entered their respective schools in middle school and continued through senior year or entered for high school. Two participants started in elementary school until their senior year, earning what was colloquially referred to as "lifer" status. Ten of the students applied for their schools through enrichment programs such as

Steppingstone Scholars Foundation (5), Prep for Prep (3), Seeds (1) and Early Steps (1). The other five participants applied through their families' initiative. Overall, most students came from low-income backgrounds; only six participants identified with upper- or middle-class backgrounds.

Participants were recorded with audio recorders. The conversations were securely transferred and then stored onto Lehigh University's password-protected Google Drive, which only I had access to. After that, I transcribed the conversations with the software REV.

Data & Analysis

Academic Experience

The choice to attend an elite school is not an arbitrary decision; on the contrary, it was a meticulous decision students' families made for their children to have a "superior education", compared to public schools, that will prepare students for college (Davis, 2011). Private institutions (Davis, 2011) tend to have smaller class sizes, advanced academic courses, more areas for extracurricular activities for students, and more involvement from parents and teachers that attract families to apply for their children. Additionally, there can be "an ego boost" for attending or having your own child attend an elite school that has sent many graduates off to Ivy Leagues. Jolean, from The Winsor School, mentions that many of her classmates had legacy status at prestigious universities. For white and upper-class families, many choose private schools because it's a place where their kids would be around peers who are similar to them (Davis, 2011).

However, families who enrolled their children in enrichment programs sought to break racial or socioeconomic barriers that could inhibit the ability to attend college and fulfill a life of economic freedom. For instance, Zuri from the Dalton School, said her mom put her into the

Early Steps program in New York City (NYC) as an elementary-schooler because she wanted Zuri to go to a "good" school unlike the institutions in the NYC public school system. In the American school system, most families are only able to enroll their child into whatever school that is available in their neighborhood. Public schools, especially ones in lower-income and dominant minority neighborhoods, have bigger class sizes that enable students to get lost in the crowd which is less likely in private schools. Generally, American public schools (Darling-Hammond, 1998) have reduced resources, limiting the access to books, materials, and computers that are needed for students to excel in school. Many public schools have less-qualified teachers and second-rate curriculums that may not prepare students for college. So, for participants like Rheanna, her and her mom felt that participating in Steppingstone would be a direct ticket to going to college.

Enrichment programs allow disadvantaged students to be able to make the choice, which many did not have before, to attend a school of their choosing. Families have the capacity to explore different schools as they seek the certainty that their children are receiving what they see as a stellar educational experience. Thus, the interview data suggests the schools successfully argued for–and the parents of my subjects internalized–a kind of educational "excellence" from a variety of directions.

This promised educational future became a key motivator for participants remaining in school despite challenges. "K"[2], who explains how her years at boarding school were the "worst" years of her life, never left because she did not want to disappoint herself or her mom. She explained, "I just couldn't do that to my mom…and I felt like I really had to [stay] for her." Though she was born in America, she lived in another country, where her family is from, for most of her life. As a student coming from overseas, her mom was paying full tuition and

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[2] This is the pseudonym per the participant's request.

thereby investing significantly into her education. To her, going back to her home country was not an option as she felt like she would not receive the same opportunities. This was a common theme recurring throughout the participants.

Primarily, interviewees described enjoying their academic journey because of the unique educational and recreational experiences they were able to take part of. The institutions provided extraordinary courses such as, at Tabor Academy, where Yasmin was able to acquire unique skills because of her proximity to the ocean: She learned how to use a boat and navigate what to do if she was at sea. In addition, Jalen describes loving the "paramount … flexibility" to choose whatever electives he desired at Belmont Hill. Also, the former students received opportunities to travel the world. "T" was able to go to Belize and Dubai, and had more exploration of cultures that led to what she described as her best educational experiences. Lastly, "A"[3] and her senior grade received $600-per-student to do whatever they wanted for individual projects during the last two months of school. She explains that these were not options that most students would be able to acquire at public schools. It was a privilege to be able to do these things at such a young age, so participants did not take it for granted.

Additionally, in private schools, there are smaller class sizes as Jalen describes he went from having 25 people in his classes to having 10. The smaller class dynamic is why Alina's mom wanted her to be at Montclair, in New Jersey, because it allowed Alina to get more one-on-one sessions which helped her learn better.

Though there were some great benefits, academics at private institutions were rigorous, challenging, and difficult for any student. However, the playing field was not fair for students who transitioned from public schools to private schools. During the enrichment programs, the participants had to do extra work to meet the levels of their wealthy and privileged counterparts

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[3] This is a pseudonym per the participant's request.

who had a different level of education. For both Prep for Prep and Steppingstone Scholars, participants had to complete two summers of school and an extra year of educational work before they started classes at their new institutions. Yasmin said these were the hardest classes she ever took, even when compared to her classes at Tabor. Without these systems in place, Black students about to start their private school journeys might not have been prepared.

At preparatory schools, many of the students had tutors or took extra academic extracurriculars such as Russian math to have greater advantages for college or other future pursuits. For SAT and ACT prep, many of the subjects' peers' families were able to afford tutors to help prepare for those examinations, whereas this was not a possibility for many of the low-income Black students. For example, Rheanna did not realize that people had tutors until junior year, because she was well-accustomed to completing her assignments without outside help.

"A" describes, as a student chosen to do Prep for Prep, she was seen as "gifted" amongst her counterparts in her neighborhood, but entering this new environment she was put at a disadvantage because of those additional resources many students had. "A" had classmates at her school who were fluent in French because they lived in Paris for multiple summers. Similarly, Jolean said she felt like "a small fish in a big pond." With that there was competition between students as "You have to out-compete the next person, and I feel like that takes a really big toll on yourself, especially when you're coming from nothing," "C" describes at Blair Academy. Alina mentions that she felt like if she did not get an A, she was not smart enough. Thus, students had to learn how to excel in these competitive and sometimes disadvantageous environments.

At Hotchkiss, Josline describes that many of her classes were taught in the Socratic method, so she had to learn how to use her voice, which was hard for her to adapt to because she was not taught how to do so in her home environment. Sociologist Annette Lareau (2014) established two terms to describe the raising of children in different income lifestyles: concerted cultivation and accomplishment of natural growth. In concerted cultivation, children are taught how to be an advocate for themselves while communicating their feelings and opinions with adults. However, in accomplishment of natural growth, children who grow up in low-income families do not learn those skills. Rather, because of their circumstances, they adapt to what resources they already have and became habituated to not asking for more.

It is to be expected that many of the participants who did the enrichment courses described having to learn how to speak up for themselves in these academic spaces. In many of these instances, it was rare that teachers would go out of their way to help students, instead, the students needed to be their own advocates. This is a normality in higher income communities that participants had to adapt to (see Jack, 2016). As "T"[4] describes, at Buckingham Browne & Nichols (BB&N), "agency" and "accountability" were the values that they "instilled" in her. She explained that she learned, "No one's going to know that you need help if you don't ask."

Samantha describes classes were less difficult when she utilized office hours and met with teachers. Participants agreed that learning these skills at a young age prepared them for universities, where these skills were essential for academic achievement. As soon as students learned how to use their resources, they felt like classes got easier as their academic journeys progressed.

The Building of Peer Relationships

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[4] This is a pseudonym per the participant's request.

For students in secondary school (Gurian & Pope, 2009) building relationships between peers in their grade is crucial for their well-being. Friendships are "a necessity for healthy psychological development." So, children naturally seek a sense of belonging in their environments. This can lead to emotionally stressful times for students while they experiment with different peers to find their community; they do this while navigating through issues like peer pressure and conformity (see Gurian & Pope, 2009). However, in a predominantly white space, Black students experience these issues while also maneuvering their way through racial and socioeconomic barriers.

When they arrived at school, most participants were open to making friends with their white peers. Participants were able to build relationships with white peers, but, unsurprisingly, often their closest friends were people of color (POC). Samantha, from NCDS, described, she could be cordial with her white colleagues, but it rarely went deeper than that. During Rheanna's first year, she made friends with her white peers and she described them as nice classmates, but she was unable to relate to them which prompted her to venture out and make more connections with classmates of color as time went on.

Participants who started attending their preparatory schools in middle school or younger said as they grew older their friendships with white peers changed. Alina, at Montclair Academy, who gained "lifer" status at her school, said most of her friends were white when she was younger. Some of her classmates have been in her life since they were five years old, so there was an "unspoken friendship" always connecting her with them. However, as she entered high school her best friend was Black, and her main friends were from all different backgrounds.

Scholars argue that there are five stages of racial identity development; when Black children are in elementary or middle school, they tend to be in the pre-encounter stage where

they are aware of their Blackness but may not fully comprehend their racial identities (Tatum, 1997). As students grow up, changes in "environmental cues" or "stressors" can expose adolescents to the underlying racial issues in America. Furthermore, these realizations can either strengthen or break relationships with their white peers. For instance, "A" explained that in middle school, her peers would play with her hair by seeing what items, such as protractors, pencils, and markers, they could fit into her box braids. At the time, she would laugh because it felt like a game, and she wanted to fit in. "If we're all laughing at it, I'm not going to make a big deal," she said. When "A" got older, she realized the games they were playing with her were unacceptable.

Besides maturity affecting peer relationships, Yasmin, from Tabor Academy, mentioned that while she did make white friends in high school, they would treat her differently; for instance, they would throw parties and invite everyone but her. "I felt like I was very disposable to them. They could be my friend if they wanted to laugh, if they wanted to chill in the dorm, (and) if they wanted to be around the Black boys," she said.

These situations are emotionally draining for any Black student; no one wants to feel "disposable" or to be disrespected by their colleagues. Additionally, with stereotypes of Black women following her, Yasmin describes being called "aggressive" by her peers daily. Consequently, she began to withdraw because of the difficulties in engaging with them. "It just made me feel like 'I'm not talking to none of y'all'," she said. Isolating instances like this were far from few.

The need for Black students to educate their white classmates on different topics related to race and ethnic identities added more difficulty to creating friendships. Once, a peer asked Samantha if Haiti, her country of origin, was in Africa. In response, Samantha countered that

statement by asking if she knew where the Dominican Republic was. Her white peer, of course, knew but had not realized that the two countries shared the same island. Students describe being tired and frustrated with constantly having to explain their backgrounds and teaching others.

For white students to build real connections with their Black classmates, it was important for the alumni to feel that their white peers were open to understanding their privilege, learning outside of their homogenous environments, and treating them with the same respect as their other white peers. "A lot of the students were just in a bubble, and they never left that bubble. They lived in a suburban area with white kids …and they mostly had white friends… it is not like if you're wealthy or white, I can't be friends with you… it is just like when you're ignorant …that's when it's hard for me to become friends with you," Samantha said.

Over time, Jalen at Thayer Academy described that he had to learn through trial and error which of his white peers he could be friends with. "T", at BB&N, said one of her closest friends was white and wealthy, but she was willing to learn and be educated. Once, "T" clarified to her white friend why she needed the flash on for photos by explaining colorism. Her friend listened, understood and from then on, she turned on the flash. White peers have the ability to be empathetic to their Black peers which allows for the fostering of deeper relationships, but they must be willing to do so.

Ultimately, most of the participants agreed that their POC friends were the relationships they could rely on. To put it simply, it was easier to be around "people who kind of just got it," Jolean, from The Winsor School, said. Tyler, who went to Beaver Country Day School, explains, "It'(s) pretty important... to talk to people that look like you and can experience the same things as you." The students connected through fictive kinship, as Carter (2007) describes a "relationship that bonds them on a social, cultural, and/or economical foundation."

As the obstacles continuously stood in between participants and their former white classmates, kinship was persistently vital. Participants claimed that without their POC peers they are not sure if they would have survived their school environments; these relationships were needed to feel grounded and comfortable. These are the peers the Black students can laugh with about cultural inside jokes; can speak casually to without having to code switch; can lean on to for academic and emotional support; and importantly, can rant to when racial incidents would occur, and there was no one else to turn to. As for Megan, she bonded with her international classmates significantly at Northfield Mount Hermon, she describes "I think there's an openness that I've found in my experience with people who aren't American [and/or] white or of a certain ideology, that makes it easier to have that connection with."

"K" had a divergent experience from most of my participants because she immigrated to America to go to boarding school; so, she not only had to adjust to being Black student in a mostly white space, but she was also being exposed to American values and customs for the first time. In her dorm, there were two Black girls and only one in her grade. She never got close to any of the girls because, from her perspective, "Black girls didn't want to be seen with other Black girls." Though her classmate spoke about understanding the turmoil they were going through, when "K" saw her interact with the white students it was different. She would act "like them" and be "fake". Though "K" realizes, now, this may have been the way her classmate was able to cope, unfortunately, she was not able to build strong connections with her white or Black peers. For "K", with her mental health declining, she was too tired to pretend like everything was fine. Hence, "K" was forced to find support in other areas; she relied on the school therapist (which did not help because she felt could not trust white people) and her family in her home

country for support. Ultimately, without being able to build those connections, a Black student experience at one of these schools can be detrimental.

Adjusting to the Lives of the white and wealthy

At preparatory schools, the white and upper class had different ways of living compared to their Black and lower income counterparts. As Black and low-income students were the ones who were integrating into these spaces, they had to learn how to adjust themselves to their new surroundings. For some of the students who attended enrichment programs before attending their respective schools, they had to go to schools out of their neighborhoods. For those who went to boarding schools, this was less of a problem, but some students had difficulty with traveling to school each day.

For alumni "A" and Samantha, they commuted long distances, so for years, they had to sacrifice sleep in order to wake up early and attend their first-period classes. Specifically, for "A", with Prep for Prep, the school students attend is chosen for them, so she had a three-hour commute with trains from Long Island to Manhattan, where her school was located; consequently, every morning, she left her house at 4:00 AM to get to school in time by 7:00. She remembers feeling tired all the time. The school accommodated "A" by allowing her to sleep during her first period classes or paying for Ubers, especially on days when she had to stay late for extracurriculars. Ultimately, "A" does not wish she went to a school closer to her; she just wished she lived closer to the school.

For Samantha, she had to wake up at 5:00 AM every day to make it to the train station by 7:00 to take the bus to school. Only one bus stop was provided in the city of Boston, where all students had to meet each morning. To go home, the bus would not leave until 6:45 PM, which allowed students to participate in extracurriculars; nonetheless this meant that Samantha did not

get home until 8:30 PM. "Then I have to eat dinner, shower, and do homework," she explains. "I would finish homework the latest [at] 12:00 [or] 1:00 AM. Then go to sleep for four hours and wake up at 5:00 AM [to] do the whole thing all over again." When she had an exam, she might even stay up to 3:00 AM studying, resulting in only enough time for two hours of sleep before school the next day. This was a consequence that the students had to grapple with in order to attend their respective schools.

Residential segregation is the prominent factor as to why students could not move closer because of the expensive zip codes where many of these institutions were located. For decades, (Bramhall, 2021) starting in the 1930s, "the Federal Housing administration denied loans to Black homebuyers and neighborhoods classified as 'risky' investments because of their race, ethnicity, and immigration status." As a result, (Gross, 2017) this created redlining, where anywhere that African Americans lived, was marked as "too risky to ensure mortgages," leaving many minority communities' only option being to move into urban housing projects. This (Bramhall, 2011) created a domino effect where "higher-quality schools" were correlated with wealthier neighborhoods. As school district revenues are based on property taxes, predominantly minority neighborhoods tend to have lower property wealth. This translates to less funding available in schools. While families with higher incomes are willing to pay for these wealthier neighborhoods, lower income families do not have that same accessibility. Students who went to preparatory schools in different neighborhoods only option was to commute. For Jalen, having the ability to board when he got older was impactful because it cut down the time traveling back and forth to school. Many of the students who were boarding at Belmont Hill were people of color for this reason.

Moreover, students were also exposed to different ways the social classes celebrated birthdays. Rheanna was astonished, because she was used to getting pizza or going bowling for celebrations, where it was not a necessity to get a gift. She soon learned it was a different lifestyle for her peers at NCDS, who would have fancy parties in their expensive houses; once, she never even set foot into the main house of a classmate's party because the pool house was where the event was located. It was not an option to attend these events without a gift.

Similarly, Zuri describes that at Dalton, there was a huge Jewish community, so there were many bar and bat mitzvah celebrations; she remembers one of her peer's father owned a McDonalds, so he took over the place for the celebration and had french fries on every table. However, one of Zuri's friends, who was Black and Jewish, never had a party because she knew she would not be able to have a lavish party like her peers.

The contrast in living situations proved to be a place where many of the low-income Black students had to adjust. Numerous low-income former students were afraid of inviting their classmates to their houses because they were afraid of being judged by their peers who lived in more high-end properties. This fear interfered with their relationship with wealthier counterparts and added to the reason why the Black students hung out with other students of similar financial backgrounds. "T" had a birthday party at her house, and at the time, even though she was nervous, she remembered her classmates having fun, and enjoying the food she served, so she had felt like it was a success. Until she found out later, that some of her peers were afraid for their safety. They had said, "Oh, it was Dorchester. I thought we were going to get shot."[5] This forced her to put distance between the peers that she had invited because it hurt her feelings that after she welcomed them into her space, that they would say something like that. Many students

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[5] This is a neighborhood where more than 40 % of the population is Black (Dooling, 2020) and a home to many other minoritized groups.

described they would only invite classmates over that they felt comfortable with, or that they rarely invited people over during their secondary education.

Former students spoke about times where they had to balance their allowances or money they received from family against what their higher income peers attained. For Yasmin, at Tabor, students would go to the cafe multiple times a day, where they would spend $15 on various items. She mentions there would be times when students would declare that everyone in the cafe could eat for free, "on them." This was a way of living that Yasmin could not even fathom.

"A" said she was more used to going to a deli to eat out with her friends whereas, her peers would go to restaurants that were out of her price range. So, she either ate beforehand, would not order, or told her peers she was not hungry when she ran into those situations. This caused a divide where people within her grade only hung out with people of similar socioeconomic status.

The interviewees explained that they handled socio-economic situations in different ways. For "A," she just ate with her peers that had equivalent financial statuses to her own. "M"[6] would redirect her peers to places she felt comfortable with. For others like "C,"[7] these differences forced her to become more independent. She did not feel comfortable with constantly asking her parents for money, so she acquired a babysitting job to be able to afford the extra miscellaneous things.

However, the students who identified as upper class (Tyler, "K", Alina) said that they never felt impacted by their income status while at school. So, they were able to afford and blend in with their white, upper-class peers as they never had to worry about financial situations. Fewer differences with their white classmates allowed these participants to integrate seamlessly within

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[6] This is a pseudonym per the participant's request.
[7] This is a pseudonym per the participant's request.

their institution as their socioeconomic lives were the same. This smoothed some potential racial discomfort, because Tyler mentions that at Beaver Country Day, for his other Black male friends who did not grow up like him, they had more stereotypes following them.

As for "K", though she was able to afford whatever she needed, she mentions a time where she went to her school's store to try and buy some soap to shower with. The cashier did not accept the purchase because of a hold on her account; later, she found out there was a $20 payment her mom had not paid. Her mom could not believe that because of this small amount of money, they would not let a child get some soap to have a shower. To "K" this was the confirming moment, where she realized all her school cared about was the money, and not about her well-being as a student.

Finding Ways to Affirm their Identity

At these schools, students experienced harmful situations from white faculty and peers that stemmed from racism and microaggressions. To cope with these occurrences, students depended on their peers of color and created spaces for themselves to talk about it. It was at the discretion of the students to do this because, the majority of the time, Black students felt like their faculty, teachers and administration did not care about their contentment or comfort.

For example, at times, faculty could not differentiate between Black students. Samantha remembers that the headmistress mistook her, multiple times, for other Black students at the school. Yasmin was also called "Jasmine" by her dance coach for the entire time of her participation. For "C", her advisor never wanted her to pick up challenging courses such as honors classes. Despite this, "C" chose the classes she wanted and did well, but it was apparent her advisor was not an ally to "C" with her educational journey. In addition, participants like Jolean and "C" described times when teachers would say the N word in class and excused

themselves from the repercussions because it was "necessary" to use the word to understand the context of what was being said.

Apart from the authority figures repeatedly disrespecting their Black students, they rarely stood up for their students. For Zuri during middle school, there was a white boy who was bullying her constantly and one day she pushed him against a wall to tell him to stop. The boy laughed during the encounter, however, when called into administrative offices to speak on the situation, Zuri saw the classmate use what she called his "crocodile tears" when explaining the situation. Zuri clarified she had pushed him because of his relentless bullying, but she was still suspended from Dalton. Later, she found out from a friend that he had said, "I got that nigger cunt suspended." She brought this comment up to her authority figures, but Dalton did nothing about it and he was never held accountable. This was a recurring theme between schools, when incidents of racism and microaggressions were brought up they were often pushed under the rug, leaving Black students alone and isolated from their school. How could they try to be a community if their faculty would not stand up for them?

It was clear that it was not that these institutions were passive to all their students, because at Rye Country Day, "M" describes that when antisemitic phrases were said, her school spoke up. However, "M" describes a time where a male classmate said the N word, and he was never disciplined for his actions. In her opinion, no conversations were brought up about it because his parents were paying a considerable amount of money towards the school. Though this was not proven, it heightened the feelings of outsider status that low-income and Black students felt because it became clearer that the school was not going to protect them.

In order to cope with these situations, students relied on people of color communities, especially within affinity groups or clubs on campus that celebrated diversity. These affinity

groups served as what Carter (2007) describes as counter spaces, "institutionalized mechanisms that serve as protective forces for these students and allow them to maintain a strong racial sense of self, while maintaining school success in a racially hostile environment." At some schools, like at Beaver Country Day (Tyler) and Montclair Academy (Alina), the students created these spaces themselves. These groups were a space to process the racially hostile environments the former students were in. For Jolean, it was a place where she could affirm her identity and be confident in who she was. She was able to see a different kind of excellence in her older Black classmates. She describes, "People were just very strong in like, 'I'm Black…I am excellent. I am smart.'" Whereas in A's school, her affinity group for Nigerian students was important, because there were not many spaces where her ethnicity was able to be acknowledged positively.

Besides official places, Tyler, "T", and Jalen described locations on campus where the people of color would gather to hang out. Tyler described an area with green chairs that they would gather in, and it served as a "release spot" after any incident that may have occurred. Similarly, Jalen described a corner of the library where all the people of color hung out. "T" would confide in her Black best friend in the bathroom to have morning rant sessions or she would talk to her other peers at the Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) lunch table. As Tatum (1997) and Carter (2007) discuss, this is a repeated practice for minorities to seek out a physical space for themselves. The faculty were not going to listen or care about them, so they had to create and find solace themselves. Without these counterspaces, many participants believe they would not have had the courage to persevere in their school spaces.

The former students surprised me by including that many of their white peers claimed that they also deserved their own affinity group. At Dalton, Zuri describes hearing white peers snickering outside the door of their meetings, and saying, "Why isn't there a white whatever?"

For Tyler, at Beaver Country Day, the white peers were even allowed to start their own group and had two meetings before they disbanded. There is a cruel irony to this behavior – white students had the entire school to feel safe and complete unlike their Black peers.

In 2020, there was a more urgent shift in some institutions to make more inclusive environments because of the civil unrest at the time. In that year, major uprisings occurred throughout the country in response to the rapidly rising violence against Black people at the hands of police. Currently, these were the largest protests in history, with about 15 to 26 million people showing up for demonstrations within weeks during that time period (Buchanan et al., 2020). With more accessibility to social media and the emergence of video phones, in particular, the deaths of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, made it visually clear of the persistent racism (and harm) against Black communities. This prompted people to advocate against the systematic inequalities in America.

Since 2012 (Weiner, 2022), social media has been used to "raise awareness" about protecting Black lives. For instance, in 2014, hashtags on twitter were used to show that Michael Brown "was the victim, not the aggressor," in the shooting from a police officer that resulted in his death. Thus in 2020, the uprisings sparked many predominantly white schools and universities to create "Blackat" Instagrams in order "to call out the racist and discriminatory behaviors" present. In these Instagrams, Black students would post their experiences and prove that, as I emphasized earlier, having "access is not inclusion" (Jack, 2016). The multitude of stories that were also similar across schools proved that institutions were failing at understanding and possibly did not try to see that their Black students were suffering. Yasmin was the one who created the account for Tabor, because she had "a lot of pent-up anger and frustration." These posts served as a way to express and manage her emotions with the incidents that had occurred at

school. She received attention from famous media sites such as *Good Morning America* (Genet et al., 2020) and *The Boston Globe* (Moore, 2020), but Tabor made no comments on these news segments.

For Rheanna at NCDS, after the Instagram account was created, there was a petition created by Black students for the administration to hear their concerns. She describes that the administration tried to "appease" the students, but it felt more like "shushing" them. For one, the headmistress of the school called in all of the seniors of color into her office and gave them a jewelry box with their initials engraved as a way to thank them for the important work they were doing. For Rheanna, it felt like they were trying to buy their silence.

In addition, affinity groups were forced to stop meeting (partially because of the global pandemic, so students were not allowed to gather in big groups of people) and instead, NCDS implemented teacher-led diversity, equity & inclusion (DEI) discussions within grades. Rheanna describes that students were split into groups within their grade with at least one person of color. This was an uncomfortable situation for many of the students of color because with the affinity groups they had their space, and place to be themselves. Now they were forced to teach their peers about topics such as the effects of slavery and racial bias. Rheanna said it felt like a complete waste of time, especially as a senior and wanting the ability to spend her last few months of high school with her friends. Additionally, the faculty who led these were not trained to do so, and often read off of papers, which made it feel inauthentic. Similarly, at Montclair, Alina says her school created a Black student task force where students spoke to the administration and teachers about their experiences.

This pressure for Black people to educate their white counterparts is not new. White friends and peers tend to reach out to the Black people, they know, to ask questions about racism

(Wilson, 2020). As a persistently oppressed community, these individuals comprehend their own systematic issues better than any other communities, because they are living these experiences. However, "asking Black people in the United States to discuss race is asking them to relive every moment of pain, fear and outrage they have experienced" (Wilson, 2020). With various resources available all over the internet and in libraries, this is not something that should fall on the Black community. White people (and other races) who want to learn about the discrimination and prejudice against the Black population have the capacity to seek and learn this history themselves.

In particular, Black students should not be forced to be the ones to guide faculty members on how to create more welcoming and inclusive environments. Many Black children (Mwai, 2020) are forced to grow up faster than their white counterparts, because of an "adultification" effect, where "[some] children are perceived to be more adult-like." In addition, at young ages, Black children are "taught how to operate in the world in order to stay safe." Black children are not allowed the same luxury as their white counterparts to be innocent and naive to the historical issues of America. Rather, they must be more mature when they have the capacity to comprehend these complicated matters. Specifically, with Black girls as they tend to be "portrayed to be strong at all times despite any obstacle they face" (Ochai, 2020 - 2022). This "adultification" bias blurs the lines that Black students can be educators of racial prejudices and have the "strength" to do so. It was an exhausting time, as "C" explains, "Sometimes that's not the responsibility of the students, that should be the administration." Black students deserve to be young and have fun at school, like their white classmates, without this added pressure to create social change.

Numerous preparatory schools would have diversity days or do special events for Martin Luther King (MLK) Day, but most of the time it was the Black students leading these events. At the MLK Day symposium for her school, "A" said there were presentations about Black history and Black culture that were all student-led. For "C", her Black peers had to create and decide with topics to speak about, even when many of her white classmates did not want to be there. In the same manner, for "T", her white peers would argue that they already had "diversity" and that these workshops were not necessary. Even so, she explains, these conversations would happen twice a year and the school would move on – nothing would change. It can be interpreted that these diversity days were merely a facade. If the white students and faculty, who these presentations are for, do not understand the need for them or want to be there, these diversity lectures are ineffective strategies for creating better school environments for minoritized communities.

Similarly, preparatory schools might have their token Black students to present their diversity. Zuri felt like she was the token. As she describes, "I was always a source of pride for Dalton who could peddle me and be like, 'Look at this brilliant, bubbly girl who has not been harmed by existing in this space.'" She was one of the students they would ask frequently to give tours; she gave tours to celebrities like Kelly Ripa, and people would come to school and say they saw her picture on the pamphlets. As the "token" she felt like her identity was acknowledged because they wanted to "showcase [their] diversity." This was complicated: the school extracted value out of her presence. But in some ways, this allowed her to be her authentic self because of how welcome she was in spaces at her school.

Trying to Find Authentic Self

As Du Bois claims, the term double consciousness applies for Black people in American society as they navigate themselves with the societal pressures from white society. It is what many of the Black students are experiencing at their preparatory institutions. There can be a feeling of disconnect to the different communities they belong to, while being in a mostly white space. Many participants spoke of feeling whitewashed. "A" explains that there was a need to be a certain type of Black student that counteracts against the stereotypes about the Black community. People would say she is "well-spoken" or "acts different"; in a way these words were synonymous with "acting" white. For "T", she explained that her family singled her out by claiming she was using "SAT words" when she was at home, in which they would call her an "Oreo." She explains that "I felt so offended because, 'I want to be Black.'"

To combat these situations, some students like "T", Alina and Tyler found solace within groups outside of their school community. "T" mentions that with the rise of social media, she was able to make more friends with people in her neighborhood even though she went to school somewhere else. It allowed her "to get more in touch with [her] cultural side." After she made this effort to expand her community, instead of "burning" and "frying [her hair] crisp" she felt more affirmed to start wearing protective hairstyles at school; as well as, dressing how she wanted to dress, instead of feeling pressure to wear expensive items from stores like Brandy Melville. Whereas Alina played basketball with teammates that looked more like her, which allowed her to cope with her identity and create a separate bubble from her school community. Lastly, Tyler was able to participate in the Jack and Jill organization, which brings African American children together, after school so even though he was in predominantly white spaces for most of his life, he was still able to be a part of his racial community. It was important for students to find the spaces where they could be affirmed in their identity if they were not

receiving it from school. This allowed them to endure moments of isolation they battled with at school.

In addition, for students like Samantha and Yasmin, being in a space where their identity was not always recognized gave them the room to love and feel connected to their culture even more. As Yasmin describes her experiences at Tabor made her gravitate to Black people and her cultural communities more.

Besides racial identity crises, there were gender differences that affected how students saw themselves as a reflection of their school surroundings. For Black girls who had kinkier curls and hair patterns, it served as a place of insecurity. At a school where most students had straight and looser hair patterns, other textures "[did] not fit the European standard of beauty and [were] not widely accepted or appreciated" (Perkins, 2015). Ultimately, many of the Black girls forced their hair to assimilate to these beauty standards, in order to acclimate to their surroundings.

Samantha participated in musicals at her school, and the hired stylist was not able to work on kinkier hair. Samantha felt more self-conscious about her hair, so the night before the musical she made her mom straighten it at 11:00 PM, to make it "easier" for the stylist. Jolean struggled with how to do her hair and permed it for years. While, for Alina, it was troublesome because every weekend she would wash her hair and straighten it, and then redo it all over again each week. It was not until after the pandemic, when she was separated from that space, where she was able to start loving her natural hair. Alina said at Montclair, Black boys could get away with not having the best haircuts and this was not the only privilege the men received.

Overall, participants described that Black males seemed to have an easier dynamic with the preparatory school system. At Tabor, Yasmin describes that the Black men would "tear" the

Black girls down as they were more welcomed and embraced by the school community. "A" describes that in general, Black men were more tolerant of different incidents at her school; thus, by default, the girls were looked at as "angry Black girl activists." Black girls are equally oppressed with their race and gender; in the education system, they are not benefiting from any of the systematic issues – they have no privilege and are seen at the bottom of the social ladder. Thus, they "embrace strength as a way to mask their emotion and insulate themselves from further abuse" (Ochai, 2020 - 2022). Whereas, men are benefiting from the patriarchy, thereby having more of a safety net to mitigate discomfort while at school, so they are more able to brush off incidents at school. For "A", in her affinity group, there were more women than men who attended meetings. She describes that the Black guys were almost the tokens in their friend group, something she saw girls feeling less comfortable with.

For Tyler, he describes that as an athlete, he would get into fights at times, but would rarely have repercussions because he was needed for the sports teams. He even stated that he felt like he was treated better because everyone wanted to be friends with the Black male population. With many of the male Black students being athletes, this overall "preference" not only stems from privileges of living in a patriarchy, but the school community was fetishizing them. Josline says that at Hotchkiss, the Black males were obsessed over by the white girls and people would look up to them because of their "powerful presence" at the school.

None of the two male participants had a hard time dating unlike the women participants. The only woman participant that described having a relationship, dated a Black man who was from her neighborhood. At Hotchkiss, Josline describes that her class president, a Black male, once said "All Black girls are good for [are] making sandwiches and having sex," and that the Black girls were not attractive. Many of my female respondents described that their Black male

peers would pursue girls who were white and had lighter complexions when dating. At Winsor, Jolean said her Black male peers would say "if there's no snow, we don't go" about the Black girls. This is why "C" describes having a more sibling relationship with the Black men on Blair's campus. This was hurtful for the girls' self-esteem as they felt like an "ugly duckling" because nowhere in their spaces did they truly feel wanted.

Conclusion

After their time at preparatory schools, all of the former students went on to pursue higher education. Going to college was one of, if not the most important, reason students attended their respective schools. However, an overwhelming number of participants mentioned that their school counselors were unhelpful as they underestimated the colleges that Black students could get accepted into. At Blair Academy, the counselors gave out a list to each student, displaying the schools they had the potential to get into. "C" and her mom were shocked by the list because of the less selective schools they had suggested. She compared the list to her other POC classmates, and they were similar. "C" did not listen and applied to the schools of her choosing. "It's annoying when someone else doesn't believe in you," she explained. Though these biases from college counselors are unjust, many of my participants wanted to capitalize on the doors their preparatory schools had opened.

Interviewees like "A", Jolean, and Josline, mentioned that there was an elitism factor that affected their college application process. At Winsor, Jolean says, it was rare for students to go to a university that is not in the Ivy League or ranked in the top 20. However, during Ivy Day, the day each spring when many selective colleges announce their admissions decisions, she was rejected from each one. As a result, she chose Boston College. With a 17 % acceptance rate,

Boston College is highly acclaimed and a very selective university, but Jolean was disappointed because it was not as prestigious as she would have liked.

In *American Promise* (Brewster & Stephenson, 2013), it highlights the same struggles when the protagonist Idris and his mom are in distress when he was not accepted into schools such as Stanford and UC Berkeley. His dad precedes to call him lazy, even though he has been accepted into a good university, Occidental College. Conversely, Seun, who goes to a public high school after struggling through middle school at The Dalton School, is praised with congratulations for his State University of New York schools (SUNY) Fredonia and Cobleskill acceptances. He got into college. That was all that mattered.

The American educational system is rooted in wealth and elitism. There are families who can afford full private school tuition (which nowadays can cost close to the price of college) and can then proceed to pay a full university tuition. These families, especially for parents of multiple children, are spending an almost unbelievable number of resources, which most working class Americans have never acquired, just for an education. They are doing this for prestigious colleges, who are only elite because of wealthier and white ideologies. For instance, (Carlton, 2023), since their beginning, Ivy Leagues have surrounded themselves with power and the ability to define themselves as "elite" because they "primarily enrolled the sons of wealthy colonists." At Harvard, for the first hundred years, students were even ranked by their social status. So, these universities caused division and inequality between communities. Now, because of this power wealthier families had, even centuries later, these are the schools with some of the most resources, highly acclaimed professors, and successful graduates in the world; this is because they are benefiting from the colonist systems that were created centuries prior.

Ultimately, many private schooled Black students and their families suffer these mindsets as well.

We live in a society where elitism can overrule a child's happiness and accomplishments. The limiting mindsets create a cruel and brutal world for students. For students like Idris and Jolean, it begs the question: What is the point of these pressures on children?

For "A," her counselor encouraged her to apply to City University of New York (CUNY) and SUNY colleges, even while her other classmates believed their "life [would be] over" if they had to go to one of these public schools. "A" was accepted into a renowned university, but, due to financial aid she had to transfer to a CUNY school. After being told she was "gifted" most of her life and ultimately, attending a university she most likely would have been accepted into, as well, if she stayed in public school, she questioned, "did [she] need to go to all these private schools then?"

I cannot answer this question, however, I believe, if the educational system was built on fairness and supporting all individuals, no matter what race, the sacrifices and the harsh stories private schooled Black students have experienced would be lessened. "A" may not have had to travel three hours to school because the school in her neighborhood already had the resources and opportunities she wanted to experience. She could go to any college that did not have to be defined as prestigious or elite and feel satisfied with her higher educational goals. Conclusively, "exceptional" Black students would not experience the pressures to lead their race because the playing field would be equal. However, that is not the reality in which we live in.

The last question I posed to all my interviewees was, "Would you do it again?" To my surprise, the majority of participants said they would do it all over again, with only two saying no and one person unsure. For Jolean, her experiences and academic journey at Winsor is all she

knows, which is why she would do it all over again. "T", Yasmin, and Tyler highlight that being at the school allowed them to learn how to navigate the world. As "T" describes, many of the spaces in the workspace are predominantly white as well so they acquired the skills to cope already; especially, as Alina mentions, it helped transitioning to college.

This study was sparked because of the lasting effects of the Black student experience at preparatory schools, hence it's important to realize that even after graduating, that journey stays with the students. As the participants' identity was complicated at school, though support from other POC classmates and safe spaces helped with coping, many students still struggled with who they were. For some interviewees, until they left their high school space, they were not fully able to comprehend their contradictory identities. For instance, as Black students tended to be grouped together as one whole group, instead of a racial community with different ethnicities at preparatory schools, "C" was not able to embrace her Nigerian identity until arriving at college.

Some participants, like Jolean, were up front about still struggling with who they are. For her high school senior yearbook, she refused to do a photo because she wanted to be invisible. This is a direct effect from the double life and becoming a different person to "survive" her environment, making her unsure of how to present herself. As Black students battle with double consciousness, Jolean mentions experiencing imposter syndrome as she does not know who she is because of constantly molding herself into different environments. Entering college did not make this easier for Jolean, as in this new space, that is still predominantly white, she is still shaping her identity around her surroundings.

To conclude, this study was unique because I wanted to move past stories of victimization and pity for Black students faced at preparatory schools. There were and (are) hurtful, harmful, and discomforting experiences, but I wanted to more neutralize these stories.

Given that most students would go to their institutions all over again, I did not want to paint a perspective of how horrible private schools are to minoritized groups. Rather, these instances happen, but my participants show that Black students found ways to cope and fulfill their education regardless. This study celebrates their resiliency. Simultaneously, I wanted to show that what happens at these schools stays with the former students forever. It has impacted the way they see race, themselves, others, colleges, people of power, socioeconomic status, and other areas of life. As a past preparatory student myself, I would not be writing this right now if it did not.

Most importantly, I wanted there to be more understanding of why Black students are integrating into these schools and the reason for the complexing and contradictory lives they experienced. By doing this, I wanted to display how the creation of this country has lasting effects on the education system. If you go through my entire paper, I gave the historical explanations for many of the various aspects of these students' lives, thereby showing a domino effect of slavery. Too many white people say that we, as society, need to "move" on from slavery and racism, but it is impossible. It is directly linked to the systematic issues of Black people. If Black students are going to schools, where white students feel they "should" have their own space, there is still no consensus across the races about inequities and inequalities in the country. This study, though, should be read by all, is for those who are ignorant to these problems and need to understand these ideas. The education system cannot become equal and equitable without those in power grasping these concepts and ideas. True change is not possible without fixing the loose screws from the centuries of legislation against Black communities.

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