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## **Becoming accomplished: Concerted cultivation among privately educated young women**

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## **Becoming accomplished: Concerted cultivation among privately educated young women**

This paper takes as its starting point the concept of concerted cultivation as coined by Lareau (2002). It examines whether a focus on concerted cultivation adequately captures the various practices observed in young women's experiences of being privately educated in four schools in one area of England. We suggest that a variety of practices of cultivation are evident in the reasons reported as influencing the choice of private education, the ways schools present themselves and organise the curriculum, the manner in which young women in such schools relate to one another, and the experiences young women have in securing different forms of accomplishment. Regardless of whether this accomplishment is 'effortless' or more worked at, the outcomes of these practices support young women in having a high degree of surety in the self. This surety is facilitated through family and school practices and is grounded for the most part in educational and economic security. Together, these processes support the reproduction of various forms of privilege in and through young women's lives.

Keywords: private education, school choice, young women, concerted cultivation, middle class

### **Introduction**

Annette Lareau's (2002, 773) work on middle-class parenting practices and processes of 'concerted cultivation' has been taken up by Crozier et al. (2011), Irwin and Elley (2011) and Vincent and Ball (2007) among others. Children are viewed by some middle class parents as investment projects (Vincent and Ball 2007) into which parents commit significant time and resources. This may take the form of time spent together on homework, trips to cultural venues and events (Banks 2012), enrolment in enrichment activities outside of their main school education (music, sport, language school), alongside or leading to forms of 'enriching intimacy' (Stefansen and Aarseth 2011, 389) which connect 'love and focusedness' (402) (i.e. the joy of learning and persistent engagement in the making of the self) in parenting practices. The focus is on 'making and finding the child' (Vincent and Ball 2007, 1070) through 'developing their children's special talents' and facilitating 'an emerging sense of entitlement' (Lareau

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2002, 749). This process results in the ‘production of a new generation of middle-class cultural omnivores’ (Vincent and Ball 2007, 1074).

Vincent and Ball (2007) have argue that processes of concerted cultivation take place in response to anxieties around securing positions of relative privilege (also argued by Reay 2000; Walkerdine Lucey and Melody 2001). Irwin and Elley (2011), however, emphasize that not all middle class parents engage in such an active, resource-intensive process of concerted cultivation, and question the suggestion that anxiety underpins concerted efforts to produce specific kinds of sensibility with children. In fact, Irwin and Elley argue, many of the parents they interviewed already held a degree of ‘assuredness’ (2011, 486) whereby a ‘continued lifestyle across generations’ (489) was assumed.

Building on this work, the present paper aims to consider the concept of concerted cultivation in an educational space that arguably represents the ultimate facilitation of a sense of entitlement – namely, the private school. Such schools are frequently seen to offer a ‘total curriculum’ (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a; Khan 2011; Walford 2005) with a focus on high levels of educational attainment, access to sport as well as opportunities to achieve in drama, arts and music. Beyond this, the paper seeks to make a contribution to literature documenting concerted cultivation practices within the middle-classes by drawing on the narratives of young women attending four private schools in one area of the UK. This focus is necessary as, to date, most writing on this subject has foregrounded the views of parents.

In recent years, a range of studies reporting on different aspects of private education have appeared. Research has examined how three Scottish schools are discursively constructed in web-based representations (Forbes and Weiner 2008) and has considered the ways in which Australian schools produce specific femininities or masculinities (Gottschall *et al.* 2010; Proctor 2011). The role sports play in the branding of Scottish independent schools (Horne *et al.* 2011) has also been focused upon. How young women themselves understand middle class or elite femininities has been considered in one Australian as well as one British single-sex school (Allan 2009; 2010; Charles 2007; 2010). Recent North American enquiry in the fields of private and elite education has focused on developing ways in which such schools can be categorised (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009b) and how a sense of entitlement and

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privilege is learned and reproduced within them (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009a; Howard 2008; Khan 2011).

Howard's (2008) conception of privilege as identity and Gaztambide-Fernández's (2009a) five 'E's' of elite identification offer crucial tools for thinking further about the reproduction of privilege and inequality –via school processes and also through internalised discourses of meritocracy and entitlement by young people themselves (see also Khan 2011). Howard (2008) views identity as a form of 'ideologically mediated action' (31), whereby self-understandings are constituted relationally between the personal and the social and in which identities are performed through drawing on resources available within particular social-cultural-historical contexts. Howard (2008) uses Thompson's (1990) work on ideology to consider how spaces of privilege, and being positioned as privileged, can 'establish and sustain relations of domination' (Howard 2008, 27). Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) presents a related framework for understanding privilege from his work in one elite US boarding school. He outlines the interrelated processes of (i) exclusion (the school and its students believing that not everyone can or deserves to be in this particular elite school), (ii) engagement (of students in the broad and rich curriculum offered), (iii) excellence (students strive to be the best that they can be, and this work ethic translates into an understanding of their privileged position as therefore being merited), (iv) entitlement (that admission to an elite school leads to other opportunities beyond schooling because of the school's reputation of producing excellent students), and (v) envisioning (of an elite future for those students graduating from the school). These processes, Gaztambide-Fernández's argues have the effect of internalizing elite status.

Both Howard's and Gaztambide-Fernández's work encourages a relational understanding of the making of privileged subjects and the re/production of privilege, in the sense that privilege is justified through positioning 'Others' outside of this space. As we have argued in our previous work on young privately educated young women's conceptualisations of social class (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010b), young women are more likely to position themselves in relation to others within their school rather than outside. Thus while an identity of privilege may become internalised, this may not be achieved through a relational positioning of the self in relation to an external Other. We would therefore like to re-look at the positioning and understanding of what a private

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education offers young people and how families and students engage with these ideas via an examination of the concept of concerted cultivation. Significantly, unlike most in-depth research to date on private and elite education, which has taken place in only one school, this paper draws on the narratives of young women (aged 15 to 18 years) in four private schools in one small area of England. The focus here is on recurrent themes and perspectives within the accounts young women provided; in later work it is our intention to focus more fully on between school differences.

### **The study**

Findings reported derive from a three-year study funded by UK Economic and Social Research Council (Grant RES-062-23-2667), examining the experiences of young women attending four different fee-paying schools in one area of England. The research seeks to extend the findings of a previous work (Maxwell and Aggleton 2010a; b; in press; published online 2 February 2012) to theorize further the agentic practices of these privileged young women across various aspects of their lives, including their education, in relationships with peers and family. The study also seeks to contribute to debates about school choice, the nature of the middle classes, and the reproduction of privilege.

Four schools were approached in one small geographical part of England. Institutions differed in terms of level of academic selection, whether they were co-educational or single-sex schools, and offered boarding or daytime only facilities. St. Thomas' is a co-educational boarding school, Brownstone is a co-educational day school, Osler is a single-sex (highly selective) day school, and Rushby is a single-sex boarding school. The first author (CM) spent at least one day observing and attending lessons in each school before facilitating a number of group discussions. The group discussions offered the opportunity to get to know the school a little better and hear from the young women themselves what they liked about the school, what they wished was different, what kinds of students attended the school, which other schools they and their parents had considered and how young men and women got on at the school (if it was a coeducational school).

Young women from Years 10 to 13 (aged 15-18 of age) were then invited to take part in an in-depth one-to-one interview. These interviews explored how they

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viewed themselves, their family background, their schooling history, their friendships, whether or not they were in an intimate or sexual relationship, and positive and negative experiences they had had in the last three to six months. It is intended to conduct a second in-depth interview with as many of the young women as possible one year after their first involvement in the study. The main analysis presented in this paper, however, draws on the 85 first-time interviews conducted with the young women.

Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim including laughter, pauses, changes in intonation etc. The focus of this paper emerged during discussions between the two investigators (CM and PA) following initial reflections on the interviews by the first author. In particular, we wanted to better understand the extraordinarily competent impression young women gave – in terms of their articulacy, their capacity to reflect on their experiences, and the many achievements they could recall (some unprompted, others emerging more slowly and less overtly during the course of discussions).

We take as the starting point for this paper the idea of ‘accomplishment’, the wider literature on middle class parenting and concerted cultivation, and our interest in understanding processes linked to the reproduction of privilege. We read each of the transcripts with these three issues in mind, to explore instances of accomplishments, to try to understand the discourses the young women were drawing on in their narratives, and to link these to their reasons for coming to a particular school and their aspirations for the future.

## **Findings**

### ***Going private***

For some families, the decision to purchase a private education had been strongly influenced by a practice of concerted cultivation. Young women described the breadth of opportunities offered by their schools as a key reason for parents making this educational choice: ‘[My mum] kind of knew in the back of her mind I would be capable of so much more if I went to a private school’ (Georgina, Osler, Year 10). Georgina also described in some detail how her parents had changed their jobs and moved to a part of the country where there were good enough private schools for her

and her two brothers.

Similarly, Kate's mother had decided to find a teaching position at a private school (after years of working in state-funded schools), and to move far from their local neighbourhood so that Kate could finish her education in the independent sector:

I think it wasn't so much that [the school] was private, I think it was more that [my mum] thought it would benefit me in giving me a wider education. I think if she'd have thought that the state system had more to offer in the sense of you know lectures and stuff like that and clubs, then maybe she wouldn't [have sent me here]. I mean not 'cos it's private necessarily, I think it's because of the extras we can do. (Kate, Rushby, Year 12)

The benefit of a private education was seen in both 'the extras' as Kate put it, but also the smaller class sizes and closer attention to the individual's needs. Becky explained:

And I don't know why the full story, but my parents sort of thought that if I came to this school I would get extra help than maybe I would [not] in the state school, 'cos there's a lot smaller classes, they have a really good LS [learning support] department ... and um ... they just thought I'd probably be able to cope better in smaller classes. (Becky, Brownstone, Year 11)

Those families with no prior history of private education seemed more focused on the range of opportunities and additional support offered within the independent sector than those families who for at least one generation had been privately educated. In fact, for most families with a history of being privately educated, it appeared as if there had been no real decision-making about whether to go private or not, the focus had simply been on deciding which school to choose. For these families at least, the education offered by private schools is therefore not so much 'chosen' as presumed.

A small number of the young women suggested that their parents had high expectations for and of them, and demanded certain achievements. At Rushby, while waiting for an interviewee, CM observed how the Head of Music approached a young woman asking why she had not attended choir practice or signed up for her singing lessons yet, as her mother kept telephoning to enquire why her daughter was not doing so. The Head of Music said, *'Do you want to sing? Or is it your mother who wants you to sing?'* The young woman responded, *'No, I don't really want to'*. While such anecdotes support suggestions of concerted cultivation, on the whole, young women reported that their parents' main interest was that they should be happy, try their hardest

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and enjoy school. Lauren echoed many other young women when we explored with them the expectations their parents had of them.

My parents have like always said try your hardest, and that's all ... [my parents] know that I'm not the brightest cookie in the box, I'm not going to get the top grades. But they're just happy that I put in the work. (Lauren, St. Thomas', Year 13)

Thus, going private in education can be understood as not necessarily the ultimate form of concerted cultivation by middle class parents, but as something rather less calculated: in part the recapitulation of largely unquestioned family educational practices; and for some parents the consequence of a concern that the school should support the development of their child's overall sense of well-being.

### *'We offer...' choosing between schools*

The inspection report for one of the study schools introduced it using the following language: 'very high quality of education', 'achieves its broad aims for their academic, sporting, creative and aesthetic experience and success', takes care to focus on all its students, pupils are 'self assured, ... confident ... and standing up for what they believe'. This focus on the whole child, on academic as well as other areas of attainment, and the commitment to creating independent learners and young people, was prevalent in the promotional materials of all of the schools visited, and figured on their websites, the local and national press.

The Director of Studies at Brownstone, for example, wrote in an advertisement supplement in the local paper that, 'the education we offer is one that will enable [the children] to make the best use of their abilities and interests'. In another piece, the Head of St. Thomas' argued the school offers a 'balanced approach to learning and life', supporting all children to achieve, a focus on rewarding effort not just attainment and a 'vibrant extra-curricular programme' including national sporting squads coming to train some of the pupils and 'first-rate' facilities. An 'independent' guide to the private education sector says that at Rushby those who are 'bright' will be supported as well those who are less so [but 'outside the classroom'], with the aim of all students becoming confident and 'ambitious'. All the schools also sell the idea of opportunities for students to travel to the southern world to support development projects.

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The private education sector caters for just under seven per cent of the English school-age population (Dearden *et al.* 2010), so competition is fierce as schools try to distinguish themselves and attract income, yet within their promotional texts they appear to describe themselves in very similar ways. In discussions with young women it was clear that schools had different reputations amongst families and young people: as highly academically-selective ‘you need to be clever to come here’; as a school for ‘dumb rich people’; or somewhere traditionally farmers sent their children; as ‘really sporty’; or as the girls school equivalent to another well-known boys school – so if brothers were sent the latter school, the daughters were sent to the former.

Additionally, and despite the fact that the schools seem to present themselves similarly – as offering a full curriculum, being able to boast high achievements across a number of areas, promising to be attentive to the needs of each individual, and as ensuring that all students become independent, confident and self-assured – families appeared to make the decision about which school to send their daughter to, based on recommendations from friends, a history of previous generations attending the school, having looked round the school and being impressed with the ‘friendliness’ of the students, or just liking ‘the feel’ of the place. In some cases, the required entrance exams had limited the ability to make a ‘choice’. So at Osler, for instance, the pass grades for the exams were quite high, meaning at least two young women at Brownstone had missed out on a place there.

Importantly, much of the promotional material for these schools draws explicitly on discourses of ‘cultivation’. Schools promise to develop academic and other potential (sports and creative) as well as personal attributes and skills (i.e. becoming independent and confident). Crucially, this is committed to no matter what a student’s (initial) abilities are when they first arrive. Each student thereby becomes a ‘project’ for the school to work on. However, there is also an emphasis on what might be described as ‘concerned’ as well as concerted cultivation. This involves supporting young people to find a ‘balanced approach to life and learning’ through the nurturing of the individual in ways parents are led to believe they might not find elsewhere (i.e. in the state sector). Buying into a private education is therefore as much informed by the desire to achieve particular outcomes as processes of cultivation themselves – both from the parents’ and

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schools' point of view. But how did the young women in our study understand these concerns?

### ***The expectation and desire of accomplishment***

Interviews with the young women started with the open question – ‘tell me a little about yourself’ or ‘how would you describe yourself to me?’ This question was responded to in many different ways, but the young women tended to (i) list the kinds of subjects and extra-curricular activities they did, (ii) describe their family and where they lived and then (iii) explain how they saw themselves – as ‘happy’, friends and family meaning a lot to them, ‘honest’, ‘loyal and I’m very good at keeping secrets’, ‘quite funny’, as being ‘socially around’, ‘eccentric’ and so forth.

Jacy (St. Thomas’, Year 10) for example said of herself, ‘I kind of do music, I kind of do sport, I do like art, and I try to do academic ... but like I try to like cover each bit’. When asked what she enjoyed doing, Lucy responded:

Um ... well I do a lot of M.U.N. – Model United Nations debating ... I play the clarinet and the saxophone ... in bands and various different things at school. I enjoy my school work I guess as well ... I shoot and do a lot of competitions clay shooting. (Lucy, Rushby, Year 12)

The young women led very busy lives – going to lessons and completing course work was accomplished in between rehearsing for drama productions, performing in local music competitions, preparing portfolios for art college applications, training for sports fixtures, giving prospective parents and pupils tours of the school, being part of a Young Enterprise team, preparing notes for debates against other schools, raising money to fund a charitable visit to a part of the southern world during the school holidays, undertaking the duties required of a ‘scholar’ or ‘prefect’ and so forth. To some extent, this level of activity was expected by the schools – it was timetabled in (especially for the younger years) and young women understood that being involved in the school life and taking part in many extra-curricular activities was monitored by the school and would in large part determine whether they would be asked to take on positions of responsibility. Ethel explained when we were discussing her wish to become a prefect, how she might maximise her chances, ‘If there’s anything that needs to be done I’ll put myself forward for it in the hope that somebody will notice’ (Brownstone, Year 12).

Schools' expectations around a degree of involvement and accomplishment across the academic and non-academic spheres of school life was mirrored in peer relations – which could be competitive, leading some young women to see themselves as unaccomplished or their abilities as less noteworthy. At St. Thomas', five young women in Year 11, who were all part of the same friendship group in one of the boarding houses, took part in a one-to-one interview. Three of them, when asked to describe a positive or negative experience in the last six months, discussed their most recent termly report card and how they had either beaten or narrowly lost their position to a close friend in terms of their ranking. At Rushby, those few young women who were not so heavily committed to extra-curricular activities as some of their peers felt this made them relatively uninteresting or even 'lazy'. Alice (Year 12), for instance, felt that, she was 'not a very interesting person, I'm just kind of standard' because although she was good at sport - 'I do lacrosse, hockey, netball, athletics [and tennis] ... [but] I'm not incredible at Drama, I'm not performing for a local company'.

Expectations of accomplishment – across a number of spheres – were therefore promoted by the school community through teachers and peers. Some young women drew more directly on discourses of concerted cultivation when discussing their futures, their hopes of getting into a good university, and the desire to get a particular degree. Maria (Rushby, Year 12) wanted to study medicine. She explained that some family friends had gone to medical school and had been able to give her 'loads of advice on what to do and kind of what to make you look different to all of the other applicants'. She had already completed four one-week holiday placements in various medical settings. At Osler, a group of five Year 10 girls had the following discussion:

- Georgina I know a girl who's predicted six A\*s at A-Level and Cambridge were just like 'No' ... and she's so easy to get on with, like her conversation's really intelligent and like she's really quick ...
- Francesca But her personality must have been completely flat.
- Georgina No, but they don't like just like academic, 'cos ... actually they want people who do music or art as well.
- Christie Exactly ... my friend ... I do ballet with her, and she went to her interviews at King's ... they ended up talking about ballet the entire interview. The guy was like ... 'tell me something that's not in this [application]' and she was like, 'Oh um, I dance quite a lot ... I did my grade 8 [highest level of ballet exam]...' and he said, 'Oh my gosh, my daughter did this' ... and then they like ended up talking about like...

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The degree of accomplishment that young women displayed, however, was not simply the result of a practice of concerted cultivation. Almost without exception, every respondent talked about their creative work and their sporting experiences as offering physical and emotional enjoyment, and the opportunity to invest in self-identity.

George (Brownstone, Year 13) explained that during her photography projects, ‘I always get like really like emotional like and into my work’. She went on to say, ‘you just come up with your own ideas and it’s like really good’. Not only did photography offer George emotional release, but she also seemed to feel that being into photography was what made her, herself: it was intimately bound up in the identity she presented. ‘I’m quite deep ... like I do photography’ George stated.

Georgina (Osler, Year 10) was a Music Scholar (‘I just found out I got two distinctions in my Grade 7 violin and singing’), a member of a number of the school sports teams (‘I just got like a hockey prize’) and a member of the regional youth orchestra and a national choir. In interview, she was asked, ‘Isn’t it quite exhausting to be Georgina?’ She replied, ‘Yeah, but I get bored really easily’. This exchange offers some insight into the way Georgina presented herself in this study – both in the group discussion she was part of and also in the one-to-one interview. Throughout the group discussion, four of her Year 10 peers kept re-iterating Georgina’s high academic, sporting and musical achievements, although Georgina sought in a way to play this down:

- Miranda      And Georgina is clever so she’s going to go to X [another local school with some of the highest academic results in United Kingdom].
- Georgina      Can you stop saying that, makes me feel really awkward.

Despite protesting she felt awkward about the way her peers described her, Georgina continued to debate the merits and disadvantages of Osler, and how best to get into an Ivy League university in America. She actively sought to create opportunities for the quietest member of group to be given the chance to share her views. Her overall manner suggested she felt herself to hold clear opinions on many issues relevant to her life and the lives of her school friends, and to be able to manage the flow of discussion. In the one-to-one interview Georgina explained:

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I really enjoy speaking to like people ... [especially if] they're really bright ... I don't know, I don't really know why I'm like how I am... if [my friends] need something explaining ... and I always like read newspapers and watch the news and stuff, and um ... I just enjoy like knowing what's going on.

The previous summer, Nicole (Brownstone, Year 12) and Georgia (Rushby, Year 13) had raised money so they could travel to spend a week on a local development project in Nepal (Nicole) and Uganda (Georgia). This was followed by another week sight-seeing (Georgia) or to climb a well-known mountain (Nicole). Both felt this had been a very significant experience. Georgia felt she had learned a lot from appreciating how others could be happy even if they were poor – something she tried to remember when she got upset over minor issues. For Nicole, there had been a sense of accomplishment at having proved her family, friends and teachers wrong in having first, raised the money; second, having boarded the plane; third, having climbed a high mountain; and fourth, having spent time with other peers who had inspired her to become more serious about academic work. In different ways, this experience had shaped both young women's current and future selves.

Sophie (Rushby, Year 12) sung in local competitions, was in a band, played two musical instruments and had recently taken the lead role in a youth theatre production. Her name could be seen in numerous places across the Music School of Rushby – as the winner of awards, in newspaper clippings about her stage role and so on. Sophie described herself as 'confident' and able to 'manage myself in kind of situations with different kind of ages of people'. This derived, she believed, in large part from her experiences of doing drama and music, as well as the fact that she was an only child. Sophie intended to apply to Oxford University as well as auditioning for a place at Drama School. In narrative and demeanour she gave the impression of being a young woman who was self-assured, interested, articulate, reflective and experienced. Despite her strong academic record, it was arguably her success in music and on the stage, and its recognition by peers and family, that facilitated her self-presentation as confident, mature and accomplished.

These five young women, together with many of the other participants, relished their accomplishments. Few complained how busy their daily and weekly schedules were – filled with homework, training, rehearsals. Though a certain level of involvement and accomplishment was expected by the school (and in some cases by

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parents), young women had largely internalised and acted upon these expectations because of the pleasure and sense of achievement they felt these offered.

### *Effortless accomplishment?*

Some young women, like Georgina (above, from Osler) or Nanette (St. Thomas', below) were confident and proud about what they had achieved:

I really love science, it's my big thing ... I got a prize for Year 9 science which, I think, loads of schools took part in it ... I got put into this thing called the 'Tetra set ... everyone else would do like ... three [languages] but we did four – because 'Tetra' is Greek for 'four' ... [I'm] useless at sport ... I was really good at swimming when I was little [though] ... I think I'm quite academic and like artistic, like I really love art and I've got an art exhibition [scholarship]'.  
(Nanette, St. Thomas', Year 11)

Others, however, played down their accomplishments, especially in light of the achievements of peers.

Well when people are like, 'Oh I'm good at this' - I wouldn't actually say I'm good at anything in particular, because ... because there are kind of a few people in my year that strive at everything and you can't really beat them (Elizabeth, Year 13, Rushby).

Some young women saw their friends and siblings achieving more than themselves, accomplishing things almost effortlessly – doing so 'naturally' after only 'listen[ing] ... once' and without having 'to work for it' (Jacy, St. Thomas', Year 10). At Rushby and Osler Schools, the high academic attainments and accomplishments of so many of the students meant that respondents saw themselves as simply 'average'. Louise (Osler, Year 12) had received an A-star (the highest mark) in nine out of ten of her end of Year 11 exams, but explained that when over forty other young women in the year got the same result, and the school only celebrated the names of those students who scored A-stars in all ten of their subjects in Assembly, this reduced the sense of achievement. Florence added:

You do get the sense [here] that there are some people who are really, really clever, and then if you're not really, really clever, you're just kind of average, whereas in the grand scheme of things you're not average ... but just in this school you are. (Florence, Year 13, Osler)

No matter whether the young women in our study understood themselves as accomplished, clever, extra-ordinary or simply average – overall levels of academic and

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sporting achievement, and being able to play more than one musical instrument to Grade 8 (the highest level), strongly suggests that most young women were highly accomplished. Alongside these more obvious markers of success, however, was the manner in which young women presented themselves in the interviews – the language they used to articulate their views and experiences, and the confidence they showed in speaking about themselves. These are forms of personal accomplishment which schools were keen for students to gain. What impact then do they have on young women's future lives?

### *Sureties in the making the self – the reproduction of privilege*

The reflexivity and articulacy of the young women's narratives, together with their achievements and skills, might easily be understood as the outcomes of processes of concerted cultivation. Families have bought a private education, schools have shaped their offer, and young women themselves have turned their energies to ensuring such a product. However, for some parents the decision to 'go private' is not quite so calculated. Furthermore, schools have to balance their focus on concerted cultivation with the promise of supporting individuals to achieve in a secure environment.

The narratives produced by young women also led us to question whether practices of cultivation are largely driven by anxieties to secure positions of privilege, as previous literature has argued (Reay 2000; Vincent and Ball 2007). We have sought therefore to understand more fully how the norm of accomplishment apparently so strongly embedded within their everyday facilitates the reproduction of privilege. In the final part of this paper we suggest three ways in which this 'surety of the self' is supported both by families and the schools: via a set of cultural experiences, through the social relations engendered, and a number of expected educational and economic outcomes.

Jenny (Brownstone, Year 12) was White British but had been brought up abroad due to her father's employment in the Middle East. She felt this had made her 'more aware sort of culturally', so that 'meeting people who are foreign' was not strange for her. This made her 'feel quite different', 'more developed in a way as a person, you know I've seen a lot of the world and I understand it maybe in ways that other people don't'. Similarly, Tallulah's (St. Thomas', Year 13) family situation meant she had

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developed a set of skills she felt many of her peers had not acquired. Her father held a well-known public position which meant she had met ‘a wide diversity of important people’ and had had to learn to ‘entertain’ them. Her family’s very public role made her ‘feel like my family is just ... is a bit different, and I love that’. Additional support for Tallulah’s sense of distinction derived from a family history of attending Cambridge – her father and uncle were both alumni of that university, her brother had just gone up, and she herself had recently secured a place.

Schools further supported some of the cultural experiences made available by families. The emphasis on art, music, drama and debate was reinforced by external speakers and travel abroad. During the early interviews at Rushby, for example, a famous chef came in for an afternoon (to run a cooking contest) as did a well-known BBC journalist (who talked about her career). The outcome of access to such experiences supported the development of well-rounded, creative, knowledgeable sociable young woman. It further embedded an assuredness of identity that could be articulated, and which was distinguishable from others – as academic, as artistic, as having experiences which were of note and so forth.

Families were also central in positioning the young woman as part of a wider network of social relations. Eliza (Rushby, Year 13) explained she felt very assured of her future trajectory even if she had decided not to go to university, because she was confident that through her family connections she would be able to take up an interesting diplomatic position – ‘Nowadays, which is sort of awful, but um ... good for those who have them, there’s connections ...’. Through her family’s extensive networks she had already secured work experience placements at several prestigious magazines, with the royal family, and at a famous jewellery-makers. Schools too played a role in social networking. Older students buddied younger ones, prefects and scholars took responsibility for organising events and dealing with ‘issues’, teams self-managed enterprise projects or Duke of Edinburgh award challenges, and students were encouraged to approach their teachers whenever they needed additional support.

Long-term connections to the school were fostered via alumni networks with ‘old girls’ returning to talk about what the future might hold. Furthermore, networking with young people in other private schools through debates, ‘socials’ and dances, or joint classes for some subjects, mean that long-term social relations extend beyond the

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school. A number of participants acknowledged that they would likely marry someone who had also been privately educated because of these networks. All these mechanisms offer young women the surety of familiarity, of 'presence' and of belonging, which fostered confidence and poise in the present, and travels with them when they move beyond the safe walls of the school into the wider world.

Allie (Rushby, Year 12) was just one of many young women who presented herself as confident, ambitious, energetic and focused, with a degree of surety that would ensure she remained ahead of the game. Allie began her interview by describing the life-threatening medical condition she had to live with. However, despite missing a whole term of school in Year 9 due to her illness, she returned to sit a Chemistry exam and got ninety per cent 'without even having been to a single Chemistry lesson'. She planned to apply to various Ivy League universities in the USA, but with Oxford or Cambridge and the London School of Economics as her 'back-up's'. Allie explained 'I've always wanted to go to be the best or do the best'. She went on:

When I was little I always used to think I was going to make myself a millionaire by the time I was ten [years old] ... and I always had like my ideas book and I always used to like make inventions and stuff. One of them actually worked really well ... it was solar powered train, a model of it ... I think [I made it when] I was six [years of age].

Most of the young women in this study planned to go to university and there was no suggestion on their part that they would not succeed in gaining entry to one of their top choices. Those few who opted not to go to university chose Drama or Art School instead, or in one or two cases (at Brownstone only) begin an apprenticeship in a particular line of work (such as veterinary nursing). The careers young women spoke about, while not always definitively decided upon, were to a large extent planned and many commanded high salaries.

While many of the young women in our study had less grand ambitions than Francesca (Osler, Year 10), they all had ambitions to make a success of their educational and employment careers (at least until they had children):

I think if you're going to become famous or you're going to become well recognised it better be for something good. And acting was great, you know that's very good, but I think being Prime Minister or being a member of parliament is very worthwhile because you get to really understand how the country's run and you can influence important decisions which ... for me like the new train system which is

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going to go through X [nearest big city], I'm strongly, strongly against ... I'm very open, I'd like to become Prime Minister, but I'd like to be a CEO, I'd like to be a banker, there's all that that's open to me. (Francesca, Osler, Year 10)

Certainly, as Irwin and Elley (2011) argue, the experience of economic privilege within the family offers a kind of surety in respect of future educational and economic position. Thus, the future is understood not as a place of difficulty, but as a destination in which new opportunities will present themselves, which will be navigated with the same ease that young women's experience of becoming 'accomplished' suggests.

## **Conclusions**

Lareau's (2002) concept of concerted cultivation has been widely drawn on by writers theorizing the practices of middle-class parents (Clark 2009; Crozier *et al.* 2011; Irwin and Elley 2011; Stefansen and Aarseth 2011; Vincent and Ball 2007). In recent work, Irwin and Elley (2011) have sought to develop this concept further by distinguishing between concerted cultivation for the present (in terms of a focus on a child's development) and concerted cultivation for the future. The reading of our data offered here also suggests a focus both on the present as well as the future, but we are more hesitant in suggesting these practices are as instrumental and calculated as others might argue. Young women in our study suggested their parents were just as concerned to ensure that they became happy, sociable individuals as success stories in later life.

Looking more closely at young women's perceptions and experiences, our findings suggest new dimensions to cultivatedness beyond those documented to date. Without exception, all young women displayed evidence of a variety of accomplishments, both academic and in spheres such as sport, music, drama, debating. Beyond this, however, they had acquired sensibilities and bodily dispositions which enabled them to come across as able, convincing, confident, articulate, reflective, sociable, mature and poised. In the literature to date, notions of concerted cultivation suggests effort, purpose and an instrumental focus on improvement which we did not necessarily find captured the way our study participants experienced their lives. The desire and pleasure young women displayed in their interactions, as well as the effortless achievement some spoke of, calls for a more grounded and nuanced understanding of what may be taking place, for young women of comparable background at least.

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The forms and levels of accomplishment within our sample leads us to consider how these inform the making of the self and what role they play in the reproduction of privilege – the question which led to a focus on middle class parenting practices in the first place. In this respect, we agree with Irwin and Elley's (2011) suggestion 'that anxiety about facilitating a good future for [...] children is a *particular*, rather than *general*, account of middle-class parenting experiences' (p. 492, italics in the original). Here, we encountered many young women for whom there was (like the parents in Irwin and Elley's account) an 'assumption of continued lifestyle across generations' (2011, p. 489).

Gaztambide-Fernández's (2009a) identification of the five E's of elite schooling and Howard's (2008) conceptualisation of privileges as an identity aim to illustrate how elite status becomes internalised. The argument we have developed here makes a very similar point around the internalisation of accomplishment linked to a surety of the self. However, the more exclusionary practices detailed by Gaztambide-Fernández (and by Howard – in the 'unintentional' (p. 217) lessons learned by students in the four elite schools he studied) as central to the reproduction of privilege were not so evident in the schools in our research. Though students did distinguish between themselves and peers at other private schools, they did not necessarily see these others as less accomplished, and while some young women accepted that others in their school were more accomplished, they worked hard to find a way of positioning themselves as having achieved in some sphere of the school life (albeit less overtly, perhaps less recognised by others, but through strong friendship skills which were highly valued by all). We have doubts therefore whether Gaztambide-Fernández's five E's framework can necessarily capture the processes at work in schools such as those studied here. In future analyses, we aim to explore these issues in greater depth, especially as second wave data from the present study becomes available.

Although the four participating schools arguably present themselves in very similar ways via their promotional materials, our reflections on our experiences of the schools and the research encounters we have had, suggest that these schools variously shape their students' perspectives and self-understandings. For instance, the sense of rounded accomplishment came across most strongly at Rushby, yet the focus on attainment and on 'getting involved' in sports teams, drama productions and so forth

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was found in almost equal measure across all four schools. We intend to analyse in greater depth differences between schools in a subsequent paper by considering whether it might be possible to distinguish between the kinds of families who choose particular schools in the local private education market and the various ways the schools (through the staff, the students, the physical and affective spaces within and surrounding the schools, and interactions between students from other local private schools) may create differently privileged subjects. For the present, however, there seems little doubt that both accomplishment and surety in the self have a central role to play in enabling young women to distinguish themselves, laying the foundation for the production and reproduction of later forms of privilege.

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### **Notes**

<i>School</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Quoted participants</i>
<b>St. Thomas'</b>	Co-educational boarding school	Jacy (Year 10) Nanette (Year 11) Lauren (Year 13) Tallulah (Year 13)
<b>Brownstone</b>	Co-educational day school	Becky (Year 11) Ethel (Year 12) Jenny (Year 12) Nicole (Year 12) George (Year 13)
<b>Osler</b>	Single-sex (highly selective) day school	Georgina (Year 10) Miranda (Year 10) Christie (Year 10) Francesca (Year 10) Louise (Year 12) Florence (Year 13)

<b>Rushby</b>	Single-sex boarding school	Alice (Year 12) Allie (Year 12) Kate (Year 12) Lucy (Year 12) Maria (Year 12) Sophie (Year 12) Eliza (Year 13) Elizabeth (Year 13) Georgia (Year 13)
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