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Hidden among Privilege: Increasing Belonging for Low SES Students at Affluent Schools through Participatory Action Research

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Hidden among Privilege:
Increasing Belonging for Low SES Students at Affluent Schools through Participatory Action Research

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requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Natalie Katherine Johnson

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Hidden among Privilege:

Increasing Belonging for Low SES Students at Affluent Schools

through Participatory Action Research

by

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University of California, Los Angeles, 2016

Professor Diane Durkin, Co-Chair

Professor Tyrone C. Howard, Co-Chair

This participatory action research study engaged twelve members of an affluent school community in studying socioeconomic exclusion at their own school. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who attend predominantly affluent schools lack a sense of belonging in such environments (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff and Reichert, 2003). While low SES students may benefit academically by attending elite schools, their perceived outsider status creates a psychological cost and prevents them from experiencing the full benefits of such schools (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; Martin, 2012; McLoughlin, 2012).

As adult and student participants worked together to understand sources of class-based exclusion at their school, they came to see how the school's culture promotes upper-class norms and excludes lower SES students. The team engaged in cycles of background learning, data

collection, discussion and analysis of the data, and development of recommendations and interventions. The study ultimately explored how the collaborative learning process itself unfolded and the extent to which it changed the way participants thought about the problem of class-based exclusion at the school.

The action research team identified tangible sources of exclusion and developed concrete recommendations. Lower SES students at the school were less able than their affluent peers to afford extracurricular activities and trips, creating an experience gap between wealthy and non-wealthy students. The team recommended changes to financial aid policies and practices, as well as expanded faculty training, to shrink the gap and create a more equitable experience. Most importantly, though, the team uncovered subtle daily comments that assumed wealth and promoted affluent norms. By opening participants' eyes to such deep cultural forms of exclusion, the research process itself served as an intervention to shift individuals' thinking. The study ultimately demonstrates the power of collaborative inquiry to change cultural norms and assumptions, starting with individuals' cognitive frames.

The dissertation of Natalie Katherine Johnson is approved.

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2016

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CHAPTER ONE

Statement of the Problem

This action research study addressed the lack of belonging felt by students of low socioeconomic status (SES) in mixed-income, predominantly affluent schools. It did so not by targeting the marginalized group, but by investigating the privileged culture of the school; ultimately the collaborative research process itself shifted participants' cognitive frames, helping them see subtle forms of socioeconomic exclusion in the school culture that were previously invisible to them.

Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds who attend predominantly affluent schools lack a sense of belonging in such environments (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff and Reichert, 2003). School belonging, defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school environment (Goodenow, 1993), relates positively to motivation, academic achievement, self-efficacy, and psychological health, particularly among adolescents (Anderman, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Tillery, Varjas, Roach, Kuperminc, & Meyers, 2013).

Compared to lower SES peers, affluent students at elite schools participate more actively in school activities, seek more help from and have closer relationships with faculty, and feel a greater sense of fitting in and identification with the institution, all of which contribute to an overall sense of belonging (Brantlinger, 2003; Cueto, Guerrero, Sugimaru, & Zevallos, 2009; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). While low SES students may benefit academically by attending affluent schools, their perceived outsider status creates a psychological cost and prevents them from experiencing the full benefits of such schools (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; Martin, 2012; McLoughlin, 2012).

Affluent schools tend to reinforce the privilege of wealthy students, creating cultures that exclude low SES students (Cookson, 2013; Jackson, 1990; Howard, 2008; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). A deficit view focused solely on low SES students is insufficient for fostering belonging at predominantly affluent schools; research instead indicates a need for elite schools to critically examine and change the broader school culture (Bergerson, 2007; Kuriloff and Reichert, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Through an action research team of adults and students at an affluent high school, this project engaged community members in studying their own school culture to understand and address the problem of class-based exclusion. Participants collaboratively studied the problem and developed recommendations to disrupt class privilege and increase belonging for lower SES students. The study ultimately explored the extent to which engaging in such a collaborative self-study changed the thinking of participants themselves.

Increasing Socioeconomic Diversity in Schools

In recent years, many schools and districts in the U.S. have pursued socioeconomic integration (Kahlenberg, 2012). Both public and private schools are seeking to increase socioeconomic diversity, though for different reasons. Public districts have focused on SES to integrate schools in the wake of *Parents Involved v. Seattle* (2007), a Supreme Court case that limited the use of race in school assignment (Crosnoe, 2009; Kahlenberg, 2007). Research indicates that low SES students achieve better academic outcomes when they move to wealthier schools (Mickelson & Bottia, 2010; Kahlenberg, 2007). Private or independent schools, on the other hand, are expanding financial aid to enroll a more diverse student body and to admit the most talented students regardless of financial status (Powell, 1996; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Higgins, 2014).

More than 80 public school districts considered SES in school assignments in 2012, up from 40 districts in 2007 (Kahlenberg, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2012). And while many independent schools have historically been institutions of and for the wealthy (Cookson & Persell, 1987; Powell, 1996), scholarships and financial aid steadily expanded over the course of the twentieth century (Powell, 1996). The median percentage of independent school students receiving financial aid climbed from 12% in 1950 to 22.9% in 2013 (Powell, 1996; Mitchell, 2013). The 2008 financial crisis brought a decline in financial aid budgets, but most independent schools have since aimed to expand financial aid (Mitchell, 2013; Mitchell, 2014).

There are key benefits of socioeconomic integration for all students, including academic benefits for lower SES students who gain access to resource-rich schools (Kahlenberg, 2007). However, as the proportion of affluent students increases in a school, making less wealthy students a minority, lower SES students experience greater stress and isolation (Aries & Seider, 2005; Crosnoe, 2009). As more schools pursue socioeconomic integration, they will need to address psychosocial drawbacks for low SES students if the benefits of socioeconomic diversity are to outweigh the costs.

Social Class and Belonging in Affluent Schools

Research indicates that while absolute socioeconomic status may not affect sense of belonging (Ma, 2003), *relative* socioeconomic status does. That is, when a student is lower SES than most of his peers, he feels less belonging (Crosnoe, 2009; Cueto et al., 2010). Such diminished sense of belonging manifests in several ways. Compared with their affluent peers, low SES students at predominantly affluent schools participate less in school activities (Brantlinger, 1993; Martin, 2012; McLoughlin, 2012); have fewer connections with faculty

(Arzy, Davies, & Harbour, 2006; Calarco, 2014; McLoughlin, 2012); and feel a greater sense of isolation or alienation (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003).

Strategies and programs exist to increase participation and faculty connections for low SES students in elite schools (Calarco, 2014; McLoughlin, 2012). However, the feeling of isolation or alienation proves difficult to address. Schools tend to adopt a deficit frame in attempting to help low SES students adapt to affluent schools, targeting or seeking to change the marginalized group (McLoughlin, 2012). But the subtle unease of low SES students at elite schools indicates a need to examine and change school cultures themselves (Bergerson, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus and field help explain the discomfort of lower SES students at affluent schools. Habitus, the set of habits and dispositions produced by one's class background, interacts with field, a complex social setting with particular rules and norms (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1993). Elite schools are fields dominated by affluent rules, and lower SES students arrive with a lower class habitus. The mismatch between habitus and field creates discomfort for low SES students (Bergerson, 2007; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2009). Privileged norms and values embedded in elite schools' cultures thus create environments in which low SES students feel excluded (Howard, 2008; Khan, 2012).

A Culture of Wealth: How Affluent Norms Dominate Elite Schools

Elite schools reinforce privileged identity and status, intentionally or unintentionally affirming the norms, values, and behaviors of affluent students while excluding low SES students. Schools do this through their organizational habitus, the set of class-related values and norms transmitted to members of a shared institutional culture (Howard, 2008). Related to

organizational habitus is a school's hidden curriculum, the lessons taught through everyday functions and routines at the school (Cookson, 2013; Jackson, 1990; Howard, 2008; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Schools transmit and reinforce upper class habitus through material resources and status symbols, traditions and ceremonies, and academic expectations (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012). An affluent school's organizational habitus and hidden curriculum create the elite field in which lower SES students feel out of place.

By intentionally or unintentionally reinforcing class privilege, affluent schools create fields that align with the habitus of affluent students. Such alignment creates comfort and ease for wealthy students and ultimately discourages critical examination of the school climate. This ease leads affluent students to see their norms, values, and behaviors as "normal" in such school environments (Howard, 2008; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Low SES students, too, lack a critical stance toward social class (Aries & Seider, 2007; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Affluent schools, particularly elite independent schools, promote discussions of race, gender, and other identities, but they typically avoid or minimize SES (Cookson & Persell, 1991; Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

Fostering full belonging for low SES students requires affluent schools to critically examine their own privileging culture (Bergerson, 2007; McLoughlin, 2012). Critical consciousness, an understanding and exposure of oppressive structures, empowers poor and wealthy students alike, as well as faculty, to question and ultimately change their school culture (Freire, 1970; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; White, Mistry, & Chow, 2013). There is an absence of approaches for cultivating critical consciousness around socioeconomic class in affluent schools.

Existing Interventions and Rationale

Economic justice curricula, cross-group dialogues, and service learning programs all have had mixed results in cultivating critical consciousness of socioeconomic class. Courses on

economic inequality and justice appear to deepen students' understanding of poverty's causes. But they do not lead students to permanently change their attitudes toward inequality (Seider, 2011; Mistry, Brown, Chow & Collins, 2011). Similarly, intergroup dialogue courses in which students from different socioeconomic backgrounds engage in discussions produce a greater awareness of socioeconomic issues, but they fail to make students more comfortable discussing class (Sanders and Mahalingam, 2012).

Service learning that integrates classroom curricula on poverty with community service has proven more effective in changing students' attitudes toward economic inequality (Seider, Rabinowicz, and Gillmor, 2010). However, many schools, particularly more elite schools, tend to have community service programs that reinforce privileged attitudes and assumptions (Howard, 2008). Students leave their school communities to give back, placing themselves above those they serve, and they fail to critically question the structures that lead to inequality and the inequality in their own schools (Howard, 2008).

There is an absence of research in which members of a school critically examine the class-based climate of their own school and develop approaches for interrupting privilege and increasing belonging. Participatory action research has been used to examine privilege in a small number of studies, primarily focusing on masculine hegemony and bullying (Stoudt, 2009; Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012). My study used participatory action research in the form of collaborative inquiry to examine the socioeconomic landscape of an affluent school's culture. I ultimately investigated whether such critical examination of the school culture changed participants' views of the problem of class-based exclusion.

The Project

This study took place at a predominantly affluent private high school in the L.A. area. The action research team consisted of students of varied class backgrounds, faculty, staff, and administrators acting as insider researchers of the school culture. The team engaged in cycles of background learning, data collection, discussion and analysis of the data, and development of recommendations and interventions. The study ultimately explored how this collaborative learning process itself unfolded and the extent to which it changed the way participants thought about the problem of class-based exclusion at the school.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What does a collaborative inquiry team of students and adults identify as the most salient expressions and causes of class-based exclusion at the school, and what recommendations do they make to address the problem?
2. How and to what extent does the action research process influence participants' views of class-based exclusion at the school?

Research Design

This was primarily a qualitative study using action research. A quantitative approach was not able to capture in depth the experiences and perceptions of members of a school community as they engaged in a critical examination of their school culture (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methods allowed for a deep understanding of the process and participants' changing attitudes as they studied the problem. Since privilege and habitus largely go unseen and unscrutinized in elite environments, more traditional qualitative methods were insufficient for this study (Howard, 2008; McIntosh, 2012). A case study, for example, could add to the growing body of literature

that examines the exclusionary and privileging forces at elite schools. But interviews or focus groups alone likely would not be able to fully explore and disrupt the deeply rooted values, norms, and assumptions, particularly those of privileged individuals. Instead, I used participatory action research to engage community members in discussion, collaborative inquiry, and change.

Data Collection & Analysis

I collected data through pre and post interviews and surveys, observations of team meetings, documents produced by the team, and participant journals. Pre and post interviews were necessary to learn how and to what extent the action research process changed participants' views of the problem. Pre and post questionnaires provided supporting quantitative data, which helped to triangulate interview data. I observed team meetings to collect data about both the process and the participants' changing views. Participant journals allowed me to gather data on participants' individual experiences in each meeting, which helped me identify major shifts or turning points in participants' thinking.

I used coding/thematic analysis and narrative analysis to make sense of the data. Narrative analysis allowed me to construct a meaningful story of what the team learned about the sources of the problem, how they learned it, and what they recommended. I analyzed observation data, team documents, and participant journal data to reflect phases of the action research cycles, including the research questions developed by the team, inquiry methods, interpretations of data, and findings and recommendations. I also included in my narrative analysis group dynamics and elements of the collaborative experience, such as the growing trust between group members and the unique nature of adult-student teamwork. To answer my second research question, I coded interview and journal data for themes connected to participants' changing views of the problem. I specifically examined whether a participant moved from a deficit to a structural or cultural

view of the problem, or from a focus on the more tangible experience gaps to the less visible forms of exclusion, such as SES-related microaggressions. I began data analysis early in the action research process and allowed codes/themes to emerge as the process unfolded, ultimately adapting my analysis as I compared pre and post interviews and survey data at the individual level.

Site Selection

This study required a socioeconomically integrated, predominantly affluent school as the site. While the site had to be a privileged environment in which low SES students lack a sense of belonging, a commitment to diversity and inclusion was also important. To implement an action research study, I needed participants with some interest in improving the school environment in regards to class privilege and exclusion.

Hamilton School, a K-12 independent day school in the Los Angeles area, reflected these criteria. One in six students at Hamilton receives financial aid and the rest pay full tuition, which is $31,835 per year for grades 9-12. A selective, tuition-based independent school located in an affluent area of L.A., Hamilton represents an upper class field with affluent norms. However, Hamilton also has an explicit commitment to diversity and financial aid. The school has a growing number of low-income students, but such students remain in the minority and feel excluded from the mainstream affluent culture. A pilot study conducted at Hamilton in December 2014 confirmed that low SES students lack a sense of belonging at the school (Johnson, 2014). The forms of exclusion indicated by low SES students, such as a lack of connection with faculty and a feeling of not fitting in, align with the literature on the low SES student experience at affluent schools, which made Hamilton an appropriate site for my study.

Public Engagement and Significance

While action research is specific to the particular context in which it takes place, an action research study produces transferrable knowledge and possibilities for reproduction in similar settings (Herr & Anderson, 2014). Predominantly affluent public schools and elite independent schools can benefit from this study as they explore ways to increase belonging for low SES students. Elite high schools have shown increased interest in examining privilege, moving beyond more traditional forms of diversity work, which tend to focus on the minority group (Spencer, 2015). My study provides elite and predominantly affluent schools a blueprint for engaging community members in self-study of the school environment in order to disrupt class privilege and increase belonging for low SES students.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

At socioeconomically integrated schools where affluent students are the majority, students of lower socioeconomic status experience low school belonging. School belonging, the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported in the school environment (Goodenow, 1993), relates positively to motivation, academic achievement, self-efficacy, and psychological health, particularly in adolescents (Anderman, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007).

This chapter first explores benefits of socioeconomic diversity in schools. I look at socioeconomic integration plans in public districts and expanded financial aid in tuition-based independent schools. Such benefits come with the challenge of low school belonging for non-wealthy students in predominantly affluent schools. The next section explores how SES influences students' experience in affluent schools. I investigate in particular why low SES students lack school belonging in such environments, looking at participation, connection with adults, and fitting in. I then turn to how affluent norms and values dominate elite school cultures, using Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus and field. I conclude with research on collaborative initiatives for critically examining privilege and increasing belonging for lower SES students in affluent schools.

Increasing Socioeconomic Diversity in Schools

Socioeconomic Integration in Public School Districts

In recent years, many schools and districts in the U.S. have pursued socioeconomic integration (Kahlenberg, 2007). The Supreme Court's 2007 decision in *Parents Involved v.*

Seattle, which limited the use of race in school integration plans, shifted attention to socioeconomic diversity as a race-neutral alternative (Crosnoe, 2009; Kahlenberg, 2007). A few districts paved the way in the late twentieth century, and numbers have grown; in 2007 about 40 districts considered family income in school assignment, and in 2012 there were more than 80 that did so (Kahlenberg, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2012). Diversifying schools along socioeconomic lines promotes integration without explicitly considering race.

There are other motives for diversifying schools socioeconomically. The common school philosophy and related arguments about the purpose of education in a diverse, democratic society suggest that students from different backgrounds should be educated together to produce better citizens (Cremin, 1980; Dewey, 1997). Scholars as far back as Aristotle have articulated a "diversity rationale," celebrating the value of learning among people of different backgrounds (Moses & Chang, 2006).

More concretely, research indicates that low SES students achieve better academic outcomes when they move to wealthier schools (Kahlenberg, 2007). A 2010 study found that all students, regardless of SES or race, were more likely to have higher math scores if they attended a socioeconomically diverse school (Mickelson & Bottia, 2010). However, as the proportion of affluent students increases, low SES students experience greater stress and isolation (Aries & Seider, 2005; Crosnoe, 2009). As more schools pursue socioeconomic integration, they will need to address such drawbacks for low SES students if the benefits of socioeconomic diversity are to outweigh the costs.

Increasing Financial Aid in Tuition-Based Schools

Private schools, like public schools, have prioritized socioeconomic diversity in recent decades. Though not restricted by the *Parents Involved* case, private schools have increased

financial aid dramatically, and many have articulated explicit commitments to socioeconomic diversity. Typically referred to as independent schools, private schools are tuition-based and select their student body through an admission process.

Though many independent schools have historically been institutions of and for the wealthy (Cookson & Persell, 1987), scholarships and financial aid steadily expanded over the course of the twentieth century (Powell, 1996). The median percentage of independent school students receiving financial aid climbed from 12% in 1950 to 22.9% in 2013 (Powell, 1996; Mitchell, 2013). Although the 2008 financial crisis brought a decline in financial aid budgets, most independent schools have since aimed to expand financial aid programs (Mitchell, 2013; Mitchell, 2014).

Independent schools justify socioeconomic integration in several ways. The National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), a membership organization of approximately 1,400 independent schools, highlights equity and fairness in their "Principles of Good Practice" for financial aid administration (NAIS, 2013). One school's financial aid mission statement says they give aid to "enroll students who could not otherwise afford to attend, and to increase the diversity of its student body" (NAIS, 2013). Financial aid allows independent schools to maintain high admission standards, since they can admit talented students based on merit rather than ability to pay (Powell, 1996). Socioeconomic diversity, according to many independent schools, also provides a more enriching, diverse educational environment (Powell, 1996; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Higgins, 2014).

The Effect of Socioeconomic Status on Education

As independent schools and public schools become more socioeconomically diverse *numerically*, they face the challenge of *socially* integrating a mixed SES student body and

creating inclusive communities. This section examines how socioeconomic background affects education, narrowing specifically to look at the influence of relative SES in mixed classrooms or schools.

How Socioeconomic Status Leads to Different Academic Outcomes

Research stretching back to the mid twentieth century demonstrates that socioeconomic status influences academic outcomes (Coleman, 1966; Rist, 1970). This happens in several ways. In one of the earliest studies on how schools reinforce the class structure of society, Rist (1970) found that kindergarten teachers placed students in different reading group levels correlating with socioeconomic status. Teachers then provided more support to high SES students, and these students in turn performed better than their "low status" peers (Rist, 1970). Social reproduction theory describes this self-fulfilling prophecy: higher teacher expectations of affluent students produce higher achievement, ultimately reproducing society's existing inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 2011).

Other studies emphasize the role of parents in cultivating and reinforcing their social class norms. Lareau (2003) demonstrated how middle class parents intentionally develop behaviors that help their children succeed in school, while lower class students lack such behaviors. Recent studies continue to show that middle and upper class children experience academic advantages. Such students have more resources for early childhood learning, access to enriching summer activities, and greater confidence in seeking help from teachers (Chin & Phillips, 2004; Calarco, 2014). Whether primarily through schools or parents, students' social class affects their academic outcomes.

Relative SES Matters: The Low SES Experience in Affluent Schools

Absolute SES influences academic achievement, but certain negative outcomes increase for low SES students when the school or classroom is predominantly wealthy. In other words, SES matters in education, but *relative* SES is particularly important. As described above, some studies have demonstrated that test scores and other academic outcomes may improve when low SES students move to wealthier schools or districts (Kahlenberg, 2007; Mickelson & Bottia, 2010). But psychosocial factors like school belonging and stress worsen when low SES students become minorities in predominantly middle or upper class environments (Crosnoe, 2009; Aries & Seider, 2005).

Few studies have explored how relative SES relates to school belonging and other psychosocial factors. In a qualitative study of 30 low SES college students, 15 from an elite university and 15 attending a state college, Aries and Seider (2005) found that students at the elite school experienced greater discomfort, inadequacy, exclusion, and powerlessness compared to the state college students. Students at the elite college also expressed heightened awareness of class due to the disparities they noticed between themselves and their wealthy peers. In a longitudinal study of 90 high school students in Peru, Cueto et al. (2010) similarly found that while SES had no direct impact on a student's sense of belonging, relative SES correlated with belonging. Compared with poor students in a predominantly poor classroom, students less well off than the majority of their peers felt a lower sense of belonging and less connection with their school.

In a quantitative study of 1,119 low-income public high school students in the U.S., Crosnoe (2009) found that as the socioeconomic level of a school rose, low-income students made less progress in math and science courses and felt more isolated. In predominantly affluent

schools, low SES students earned lower grades in Geometry and Biology compared with low SES students in predominantly low-income schools. They were also less likely to reach course levels in math and science predictive of college enrollment. Lower SES students in predominantly upper class schools also reported lower self worth and higher social isolation than low-income students in poorer schools.

Why relative SES matters. As a school's socioeconomic level increases and poor students become the minority, outcomes and experiences of low SES students decline. Crosnoe (2009) offers two possible explanations for this: competition and comparison. When school resources and spaces in advanced courses are limited, as they are in most schools, wealthy students and their parents know more about "how to work the system" (Crosnoe, 2009, p. 3). In their qualitative study of teachers at an affluent elementary school, White, Mistry, and Chow (2013) provide evidence to support this idea. Teachers reported that affluent parents wielded disproportionate power at the school, and consequently their children benefited over low-income peers.

Crosnoe (2009) and others also point to the "frog pond effect" as a reason for low SES students faring worse as minorities among an affluent majority. Just as a frog will feel differently about himself depending on the size of his pond, students compare themselves to the dominant culture around them. The result is that poor students in wealthy schools feel lower self worth than if they were in predominantly low-income schools (Bassis, 1977; Crosnoe, 2009). Whether due to competition for scarce resources or comparison with their surroundings, lower SES students in predominantly affluent schools suffer.

We do not know whether the achievement-related benefits outweigh the costs for low SES students attending wealthier schools. But there are at the very least "lost gains" (Crosnoe,

2009, p. 12). Studies of lower SES students in affluent schools suggest that to maximize advantages of socioeconomic integration, schools must attend to social factors like sense of belonging. Otherwise, psychological costs may outweigh potential benefits of socioeconomic mixing (Crosnoe, 2009).

Social Class and School Belonging in Affluent Schools

As the previous section explains, school belonging and other psychological factors decline for low SES students in predominantly affluent schools. This section examines research that explains particular elements of this phenomenon, leading toward potential solutions.

Sense of belonging in school, or school belonging, is defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and valued by others within the school social environment" (Goodenow, 1993, p. 80). Maslow (1962) argued that people need a sense of belonging before higher needs can be met; belonging may indeed be a "fundamental human motivation" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 497). School belonging relates positively to academic motivation and achievement, self-efficacy, and psychological health, particularly in adolescents (Anderman, 2003; Ostrove & Long, 2007; Tillery et al., 2013). Research points to many psychological and school factors that contribute to belonging. Three factors emerge repeatedly: participation in school activities, relationships with teachers and other adults, and feeling like one fits in and is part of the school community (Anderman, 2003; Tillery et al., 2013). Studies show that low SES students in affluent schools suffer in all three areas.

Lower Participation of Low SES students

In her seminal study of high- and low-income adolescents' self perceptions and behavior in school, Brantlinger (1993) found that affluent students were more likely to participate actively in extra-curriculars than low-income peers. High-income students averaged 2.5 activities each

while low-income students averaged just 0.4 activities. Martin (2012) similarly found that low SES college students did not participate as actively in campus life as their wealthy peers, measured by frequency and number of social and recreational activities. Low SES students were also less satisfied with their overall school experience than their affluent peers. Lower-income students often need to devote time to part-time jobs, which limits their engagement in campus activities (Bergerson, 2007; Martin, 2012).

In independent high schools, as in colleges, the cost of "add-on" experiences limits low SES students' participation. Many independent schools provide financial aid packages that cover additional costs like laptops and books, but trips and activities often remain out of reach for low-income students (Harris, 2006). Such activities may seem superfluous, but when affluent students treat them as normal and integral to the school experience, lower SES students feel excluded from the mainstream community (Harris, 2006).

A direct way to encourage participation for low SES students in affluent schools is to give them more financial support. Despite limited financial aid budgets, schools can attend more closely to the full cost of the educational and extracurricular experience (McLoughlin, 2012). Schools can also provide support services and peer mentoring to help lower SES students make full use of available resources (McLoughlin, 2012). Once elite schools identify the financial and logistical barriers to full participation of lower SES students, they can better allocate funds to encourage more participation.

Poorer Adult Connections of Low SES Students

Addressing the problem of low participation, while perhaps not easy, is relatively simple if the main barrier is financial. A more complex factor in school belonging is faculty-student relationships. Strong adult connections contribute to students' sense of belonging (Tillery et al.,

2013). Lower SES students in predominantly affluent schools tend to have weaker connections with faculty and receive less adult support, both academically and personally (Arzy et al., 2006; Johnson, 2014; McLoughlin, 2012).

Academically, low SES students at affluent schools receive inadequate faculty support. These students are often less prepared academically for elite schools (McLoughlin, 2012), yet they get less academic help than their affluent peers. Arzy et al. (2006) found that low-income college students did not feel connected to faculty and were dissatisfied with the feedback and academic guidance they received. Martin (2012) similarly found that low SES students at an elite university felt less satisfied with their level of faculty contact and were less likely to have a faculty mentor than their wealthy peers. This is likely due to differences in help-seeking behavior between affluent and less wealthy students.

Calarco (2014) suggests that lower and middle class students are less likely to ask teachers for help because their parents encourage deference to authority. Affluent students, on the other hand, learn a sense of entitlement to adult help (Calarco, 2014; Lareau, 2003). Affluent students tend to expect that adults around them feel invested in their success, and they may even blame their teacher or school when they struggle (Brantlinger, 1993). Lower SES students, on the other hand, tend to blame themselves when they are unsuccessful, making them less likely to seek help (Brantlinger, 1993; Calarco, 2014).

When lower SES students in predominantly affluent schools receive less academic support from adults, they suffer psychologically as well as academically. Particularly at elite independent schools, students and teachers develop close relationships both in and outside the classroom (Khan, 2012). Such relationships foster intellectual growth, and they also contribute to students' sense of belonging (Khan, 2012). In his qualitative study of low SES students'

transition to an elite college, McLaughlin (2012) found that such students felt unprepared to interact with faculty in the manner affluent students did. Students from wealthy backgrounds created a "banter" with teachers and spoke authoritatively in class, while low SES students felt less confident relating to adults this way (McLaughlin, 2012, p. 20). Howard (2008) similarly found in his study of an elite high school that affluent students exhibited greater ease in interacting with their teachers.

It proves difficult, though not impossible, to increase adult connections for low SES students at affluent schools. Upper class parents' concerted cultivation of help-seeking behaviors and comfort with authority cannot easily be reproduced in poorer families (Lareau, 2003). However, schools can better train their faculty to understand lower SES students' barriers to adult connections (Calarco, 2014; McLaughlin, 2012). Teachers can learn to more actively reach out to lower SES students (Calarco, 2014). Schools can also foster mentoring relationships between lower SES students and faculty from similar backgrounds, as some elite colleges are beginning to do (Ollwerther, 2014). Adults in affluent schools play an important role in increasing belonging for lower SES students. But a final contributing factor to school belonging, the feeling of fitting in with the dominant culture of the school, remains elusive for low SES students in elite schools.

Not Fitting In: Alienation of Low SES Students

A third factor contributing to overall sense of belonging is a student's feeling of fitting into the school culture. Low SES students experience a mismatch between their identities and the affluent school culture, leading them to feel like only partial members of the community. Even with active participation and faculty connections, low SES students at elite schools report feeling as if they will never fully belong (Horvat & Antonio, 1999). Affluent students, on the other hand,

enjoy full membership in and even a sense of ownership of the school (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Bourdieu's (1977) concepts of habitus and field help explain the discomfort of low SES students in such schools.

Numerous studies of elite schools show lower SES students' lack of fit. McLoughlin (2012) and Martin (2012) found in their studies of low-income college students at selective institutions that such students felt out of place. Lower SES students reported high levels of stress as they worked to adapt socially. They also lacked the cultural knowledge that allowed affluent students to more easily navigate college (Martin, 2012; McLoughlin, 2012). At private high schools, low SES students experience similar anxiety. Kuriloff and Reichert (2003) found that working class boys at an elite independent school felt socially marginal, while affluent students felt central to the school's social geography and even felt ownership of the school (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). A similar study of low SES African American girls at an elite independent school found that class differences created an outsider status for low-income students (Horvat & Antonio, 1999).

Mismatch of Habitus and Field. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and field help explain the lack of fit between low SES students and their elite surroundings. Habitus, the set of dispositions and habits produced by one's class background, interacts with field, a complex social setting with particular rules and norms (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1993). Elite schools are fields dominated by affluent rules, and low SES students arrive with a lower class habitus. The mismatch between habitus and field creates discomfort for lower SES students (Bergerson, 2007; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; Reay et al., 2009).

Further, low SES students attending elite institutions feel alienated from their backgrounds and families as they try to adapt at school. Lower class students can learn upper

class habits and behaviors, and indeed many see this as a key benefit of attending elite schools (Cookson & Persell, 1987; Khan, 2011). But true belonging remains elusive, as such students lack the ease of affluent peers in exhibiting upper class norms (Aries & Seider, 2007; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012). And as low SES students change their behaviors to adapt, they isolate themselves from their families and home communities, developing a "cleft habitus" (Aries & Seider, 2007; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; Lee & Kramer, 2013). Alienation from their background compounds with an inability to fully fit in with their new surroundings.

The stress, isolation, and discomfort in the attempt to fit in at elite schools likely pose the greatest challenge for lower SES students in affluent environments. It is relatively easy to direct reforms toward low participation and limited faculty connections of lower-income students in affluent schools. Indeed, most programs to improve the experience of lower SES students at elite schools focus on those individual students, providing them with more money or structuring faculty and peer support. However, the mismatch between low SES students' habitus and the affluent school field highlights the need to critically examine the institutional climates themselves (Bergerson, 2007; Ostrove & Long, 2007). The next section turns to the forces that shape such institutional climates, the affluent norms and values that create environments in which lower SES students feel out of place.

A Culture of Wealth: How Affluent Norms Dominate Elite Schools

Most interventions to increase school belonging for low SES students at predominantly affluent schools focus on the marginalized group rather than the school context. But a deficit view is insufficient at best and may further marginalize minorities (Bensimon, 2005). Scholars of elite education suggest "studying up," the anthropological concept of examining dominant

groups and their sources of power—looking "up" the social ladder—to increase equity and inclusion (Brantlinger, 1993; Howard & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; Nader, 1972). This section gazes upward to explore how privileged norms shape elite school cultures.

Privilege and Organizational Habitus: Reinforcing Upper Class Habitus

In her influential piece on white and male privilege, McIntosh (1988) defines privilege as the unearned advantages and conferred dominance of groups in power. Largely unscrutinized and reinforced systemically, privilege allows groups with power to maintain power (McIntosh, 1988). McIntosh (1988) argues that individuals can confront privilege by becoming aware of their own unearned advantages and examining how institutions reinforce status. In his study of elite schools, Howard (2008) reframes privilege as part of one's identity–who we *are*, not just what we *have*. Elite schools reinforce privileged identity and status through organizational habitus, the set of class values and norms transmitted to members of a shared institutional culture (Howard, 2008). Elite schools transmit upper class habitus through material resources and status symbols, traditions and ceremonies, and academic expectations.

Material resources & traditions. Two portraits of elite boarding schools examine how status symbols separate insiders from outsiders (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012). Both studies highlight the importance of dressing in expensive clothing to fit in at affluent schools, and school dress codes often reinforce the expectation of traditionally upper class dress. Related research indicates that students who feel a sense of belonging at elite day schools drive expensive cars, wear certain brands of clothing or accessories, and display other material status symbols (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). These dynamics may be outside the institution's control, but schools often reinforce expectations of material resources. For

example, Horvat and Antonio (1999) found that administrators at an elite school required expensive graduation dresses without recognizing that some families could not afford them.

Similarly, affluent schools enact traditions and ceremonies that reinforce privilege. Howard (2008) argues that traditions convey a community's values and, particularly at elite schools, rituals and ceremonies send powerful messages about their students' place in the world. Examining one school's traditions, from daily assemblies to hazing rituals, Howard identified messages of superiority, hierarchy, and legacy embedded in such ceremonies. Frequent references in assemblies to the school's elite history, for example, tell students they are part of an exclusive group (Howard, 2008). Initiation rituals and hazing communicate values of power and aggression (Howard, 2008). Khan (2012) and Gaztambide-Fernandez (2009a) similarly found that rituals and traditions at elite schools promote dominance, elitism, and hierarchy.

In the classroom: hidden curriculum. Predominantly affluent schools further promote privileged norms in the classroom. Jackson (1990) suggested that schools unintentionally teach and reward values and behaviors through a hidden curriculum, the unofficial lessons of a school. In their qualitative study of teachers in an affluent school, White et al. (2013) found that wealthy students connected academic lessons to experiences of international travel and other enriching activities. By incorporating these experiences into the lesson, teachers inadvertently rewarded the privilege of affluent students. Teachers also unintentionally reinforced class privilege when they had students share stories from their vacations after school breaks.

In competitive high schools, academic classes reward competition and individualism through grading structures and college admissions (Howard, 2008). In his study of one classroom in an elite school, Howard (2008) observed selfish, competitive behaviors, such as refusing to share study materials. The teacher did not explicitly promote such behaviors, but students viewed

them as necessary for success in the class (Howard, 2008). The discussion-based pedagogy of many independent schools also reinforces executive class norms, with seminar table dynamics mirroring the environments of corporate board rooms (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009b). Affluent schools reward the unearned advantages of affluent students and reinforce their conferred dominance (McIntosh, 1988). By doing so, elite schools reproduce privilege and create cultures that exclude lower class students.

A Lack of Critical Consciousness and Discourse

By intentionally or unintentionally reinforcing privilege, affluent schools create fields that align with the habitus of affluent students. Such alignment creates comfort and ease for wealthy students and ultimately discourages critical examination of the school climate. Low SES students, too, lack a critical stance toward social class. Critical consciousness, an understanding and exposure of oppressive structures with a commitment to altering such structures, empowers poor and wealthy students alike to question and ultimately change their school culture (Freire, 1970; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; White et al., 2013). This section examines the absence of critical consciousness and discourse around class and SES in affluent schools.

Oblivious Entitlement: Affluent Students

Forces discussed above cause affluent students to feel congruence between their upper class habitus and the field of elite schools. This ease leads affluent students to see their values and behaviors as "normal" in such school environments (Howard, 2008; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). In his study of four elite schools, Howard (2008) found affluent students to be unaware of their own privilege, instead crediting hard work and merit for their success. The result is what Horvat and Antonio (1999) call "oblivious entitlement" of affluent students in elite schools (p. 326). Extensive research on different forms of privilege similarly demonstrates how groups in

power rationalize their status and remain uncritical of their privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brantlinger, 2003; Swalwell, 2013; Thompson, 1990).

Affluent students explain and justify their status through different ideological strategies. Thompson (1990) identified five approaches used by those in power to justify their dominance: legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation, and reification. People with privilege defend unequal arrangements as either fair or universally beneficial (legitimation); deny inequality and oppression (dissimulation); unite those around them in a collective identity regardless of differences (unification); promote divisions between individuals who could collectively challenge the dominant group (fragmentation); and describe unequal structures as natural or inevitable (reification). Studies of elite schools and affluent youth find all of these ideological approaches in action as wealthy students discuss and ultimately ignore privilege and inequality (Brantlinger, 1993; Howard, 2008). When affluent students do acknowledge class inequality, they tend to point to individual reasons for class position, ignoring structural forces (Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

A Non-Critical Stance: Lower SES Students

Low SES students, like their affluent peers, lack a critical awareness of class. Non-wealthy students may indeed be even less critical of class privilege and inequality than their affluent peers (Aries & Seider, 2007). American values of social mobility and individual merit discourage low SES students from critiquing oppressive class structures (Cookson, 2013; Ostrove & Cole, 2003). Poor students at elite institutions may be particularly reluctant to critique privileging forces and systems since, in attending such schools, many seek entrance to the upper class (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Reay et al., 2009).

But absent a critical awareness of class, low SES students become doubly disadvantaged; they are already outsiders, and they feel additional stress because they lack the discourse and perspective for negotiating affluent climates. In their study of minority boys at an elite school, Kuriloff and Reichert (2003) found that African American boys fared relatively well due to their collective identity and critical stance toward the school culture. Such students developed coping strategies and explicitly critiqued the school's "social geography" around race and class (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Their "collective power to see, name, and discuss race and class issues" (p. 765) allowed African American boys to strategically adopt the habitus of wealthy white students without compromising their sense of self.

But working class white boys in the same study lacked a collective identity, downplayed and hid their SES, and tried unsuccessfully to pass as upper class. They remained outsiders and simultaneously lacked a critical awareness and "meta-understanding" of the school's social geography, leading to feelings of inadequacy and isolation (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003, p. 766). In his portrait of an elite boarding school, Khan (2012) similarly found that African American students displayed critical awareness of the school's social landscape and their place in it. They lacked full belonging but remained unwilling to compromise their habitus, and they benefited from a critical understanding of the rules of the school's field. Poor white students, though, worked unsuccessfully to adopt an upper class habitus and did not critique the rules of the dominant culture (Khan, 2012).

Khan (2012) hypothesizes that the lack of a meaningful class movement in the U.S. has made class a less salient identity for students, as compared with race or gender. Young people are aware of class and SES from an early age (Brantlinger, 1993; Cookson, 2013; Mistry, Brown, White, Chow, & Gillen-O'Neel, 2015). But affluent schools promise lessons in upper class

norms, tastes, and behaviors, and non-wealthy students are willing to abandon their class backgrounds to conform (Cookson, 2013; Khan, 2012). However, a more critical stance toward the privileged cultures of elite schools could empower low SES students to benefit from such schools without feeling isolated and inadequate.

The Need for Class Discourse and Awareness in Schools

Wealthy and poor students alike lack a critical awareness of privileged school cultures and their own positions within such cultures. The parental role, while significant (Brantlinger, 1993; Lareau, 2003), is beyond the scope of this study. But schools also play an important role by failing to develop a meaningful discourse around and awareness of class. In their study of an affluent elementary school, White et al. (2013) found that teachers lacked strategies for discussing SES and were uncomfortable when issues of class arose among their students. One teacher actively promoted critical consciousness in her discussions of social class, but most teachers in the study avoided talking about socioeconomic differences or privilege. Other studies of affluent schools found an absence of class-related discourse and, in some cases, attempts to actively downplay class differences (McLoughlin, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a). Schools promote discussions of race, gender, and other identities, but they typically avoid or minimize class (Cookson & Persell, 1991; Ostrove & Cole, 2003). The next section examines ways for affluent schools to encourage discourse about class and foster class consciousness in all students.

Disrupting Privilege and Increasing Belonging

Until recently, diversity programs at elite schools focused on the minority experience. Such schools are starting to examine the privilege and dominance of the majority in an effort to create more inclusive environments (Spencer, 2015; Swalwell, 2013). Workshops, curricula, and

other interventions targeting privilege have had mixed results in elite schools (Seider, 2011; Spencer, 2015). And most existing interventions address white privilege; few explicitly address class privilege. This section explores interventions to disrupt class privilege, promote discussions of class, and ultimately foster more inclusive, critically conscious school environments.

Limitations of Economic Justice Curricula

Several studies have demonstrated the limited success of classroom interventions for increasing students' critical consciousness of social class. In his mixed method study of 40 affluent high school students studying poverty and economic justice, Seider (2011) found that the intervention had some impact. Participating students developed a more nuanced understanding of the causes of poverty and homelessness, compared to the 43 students in a control group. Pre- and post-intervention interviews of participating students found that nine of the 10 interviewed students identified situational causes of poverty more frequently after the course; before the course, most interviewed participants emphasized individual factors. Interviewed students in the control group did not change their explanations for poverty, focusing most frequently on individual factors. The findings are limited by the small sample of interviewed students, but the study suggests that the economic justice course increased students' awareness of situational factors in poverty and decreased their reliance on individualistic explanations.

However, the study also found that the intervention group declined in empathy for the homeless, and they continued to justify economic inequality after the course. Pre- and post-intervention surveys of all 83 students used an established measurement of attitudes toward homelessness. Participating students demonstrated a statistically significant decrease in levels of support and empathy for the homeless. Attitudes of the control group remained constant. Qualitative interview data also showed that students in the intervention group continued to

justify economic inequality. Seven of the 10 interviewed students legitimized and naturalized their own advantaged position in the existing economic structure after the intervention. Observation data from the economic justice class meetings corroborate this finding. Students in the course continued throughout the intervention to justify economic inequality even while increasing their understanding of structural causes of poverty.

Seider hypothesizes that this apparent incongruity actually makes sense. Even as privileged individuals learn about situational factors that produce economic inequality and move away from individual blame, they legitimize such inequality as natural and deserved to protect their own privileged status and identity. A study of a one-week curricular intervention in an eighth grade social studies class supports Seider's (2011) findings and hypotheses (Mistry et al., 2011). Mistry et al. (2011) administered a questionnaire to students before the intervention, one week after, and six months after. The 66 upper-middle class eighth grade students were significantly more likely immediately after the intervention to identify causes for poverty outside of the individual's control, such as natural disasters.

Students in the study increasingly pointed to structural causes for poverty after the one-week intervention, but such explanations did not last to the six-month follow-up survey. And students identified individual effort as the most important factor in success even after the curricular intervention. To identify factors contributing to success in America, students responded to Likert-scale questions, with a scale of "not at all important" (1) to "very important" (5). The average for individual factors (determined by three questions) was 4.39 before the intervention, 4.31 immediately after the intervention, and 4.48 six months later. Similarly, in response to whether there should be more equality in America, using a five-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5), students responded with an average of 2.62 before the

intervention, 2.58 right after, and 2.44 six months later. This suggests students became more critical or doubtful of the importance of economic inequality, perhaps because they felt a greater need to justify their own privileged status after the intervention (Seider, 2011). Curricular interventions succeed somewhat in enhancing students' conceptual understanding of economic inequality, but they fall short of changing students' attitudes toward economic injustice.

Limitations of Service Programs & Intergroup Dialogue Courses

The limited success of classroom curricula to change affluent students' attitudes toward inequality does not mean that schools should not teach about economic justice and poverty. But academic interventions are likely insufficient for developing critical consciousness and disrupting privilege. More successful approaches include service learning programs and intergroup dialogue courses, although such interventions also have limited impact.

Service learning programs. Numerous studies have explored the effect of service programs on white, affluent youth, particularly college students. Seider, Rabinowicz, and Gillmor (2011) found in their study of 362 students enrolled in a college community service learning program that participants developed a more sophisticated understanding of poverty through the program. Students learned about causes of poverty in the classroom while volunteering at shelters, low-income tutoring programs, and other organizations. Students moved from individual to structural explanations for poverty over the course of the intervention. Participating students were significantly more likely after the service program to attribute poverty to structural causes, such as limited access to education or housing. Prior to the intervention, they identified more individual causes of poverty, such as a lack of work ethic. They also expressed greater criticism of the "American Dream" notion that success is open to

anyone willing to work hard, as measured by scores on the Protestant Ethic metric, which quantifies beliefs about hard work, equal opportunity, and ability to succeed in America.

Students credited their shifts in understanding and attitudes to the combination of a theoretical framework for understanding poverty and personal connections with individuals at the service locations. In interviews, students described how they were able to relate what they learned in the classroom to the homeless shelters and other sites of their community service. For example, one student said she better understood that poverty was not solely the fault of the individual when she observed that women at the shelter where she served were working hard to escape their circumstances. One participant noted that "hard work, the American Dream, just isn't realistic no matter how hard some people work" (p. 9). Students cited phrases and explanations from their course readings as they described their community service experiences; the study's authors interpret their findings to mean that pairing academic learning with community service gives students a more complex understanding of economic inequality because they can see theories confirmed in the lived experiences of real individuals.

Absent such an intentional structure pairing theory and personal experience, though, service programs can have negative consequences. Howard (2008) found that community service programs at elite schools reflected privileged assumptions, such as the belief that those being served should become more like the affluent volunteers. Such programs also did not encourage students to question their own privilege or the systems that produce economic injustice. In his study of four elite schools, Howard found that the community service programs aligned with a "charity model" (p. 222) rather than a transformational model that places servers and served on equal footing and encourages critical inquiry into structures of inequality. Students tutored inner-city youth or volunteered at soup kitchens, which allowed them to "give back" (p. 167) and help

individuals without questioning the structural forces that contribute to inequality. Service learning programs offer a potentially promising strategy for changing affluent students' attitudes about economic inequality, but they may unintentionally reinforce privilege.

Intergroup dialogue courses. Intergroup dialogue courses present another strategy with mixed but promising results. In their study of 102 students in a semester-long dialogue course on social class, Sanders and Mahalingam (2012) found that students demonstrated high levels of self-discovery and an increased understanding of socioeconomic status. The course used an intergroup dialogue structure that facilitated discussions between students of different SES. In small classes of 12-14 students, with equal numbers of upper class and working class students, students took part in weekly two-hour discussions led by two trained undergraduate facilitators. Students completed some readings, but the course focused on dialogue between students, drawing on individual experience more so than academic readings.

The study analyzed students' final papers to determine the impact of the dialogue course. Most participants (78%) reported feelings of self-discovery, writing in their final papers about increased awareness of their own class identity. However, students reported continued difficulty explicitly discussing class. Working class students struggled with feelings of shame and inadequacy throughout the course. For example, one working class woman wrote in her final paper that she hesitated to identify herself as low SES because she "did not want anyone to feel sorry" for her (p. 122). Affluent students tended to emphasize their work ethic to defend their advantages. One wrote, "We've had to work just as hard… It is bothersome that we are stereotyped because of our wealth" (p. 122). Students from both SES groups were unable to break through such guilt and defensiveness in the dialogue course, which limited the explicit discussion of class.

Despite limitations, service learning programs and intergroup dialogue courses offer potentially useful strategies for increasing students' understanding of economic inequality. But neither approach engages students in a critical examination of their own school culture as a privileged field, a field that interacts with one's habitus to create belonging or lack thereof. The next section deals with participatory action research and collaborative inquiry projects aimed at examining privilege and fostering inclusive environments.

Action Research: Engaging the Community in Change

Action research, specifically participatory action research (PAR), has been used in recent years to engage advantaged communities in examinations of their own privilege. PAR is a collaborative approach involving members of a community conducting their own research and developing solutions to self-identified problems (Lewin, 1946; Reason & Bradbury, 2013). PAR has traditionally involved marginalized groups, but scholars of elite schooling and privilege have called for a research agenda using PAR to study and disrupt privilege in dominant groups (Fine & Burns, 2003; Howard & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; McIntosh, 2012). Traditional research methods fall short of fully examining and disrupting privilege because, by definition, privilege is deeply embedded in the dominant norms of a culture and therefore difficult to uncover without ongoing engagement and reflection on the part of participants/subjects (McIntosh, 2012).

Bensimon (2005) demonstrated that the inquiry process, learning about inequality at one's own organization, can shift individuals' cognitive frames from a deficit view to an equity frame. In her study of the racial achievement gap at the university level, Bensimon (2005) observed inquiry teams of professors, counselors, and deans as they collected, examined, and made sense of data from their own institution, which showed patterns of unequal achievement for students of color. By seeing the evidence themselves and trying to make sense of it, inquiry

team members began shifting from a deficit understanding of the problem to an equity frame, which emphasized the institution's responsibility to change.

In elite contexts, collaborative inquiry can provide information about privileging systems while simultaneously disrupting and interrogating those systems from within (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010). Studies have looked at male privilege and white privilege, with some tangential consideration of socioeconomic privilege, but there is an absence of PAR studies directly focused on class privilege and socioeconomic exclusion in elite school environments. PAR studies have yet to directly examine the class-based rules and norms of a contained, privileged field, such as an elite independent school, where such norms reinforce class privilege and exclude non-wealthy students.

Disrupting white and male privilege through PAR. Participatory action research studies conducted in elite school environments have successfully engaged community members in critical examination of white privilege and male privilege. Such studies offer lessons for communities seeking to disrupt class privilege. For example, Stoudt (2007, 2009) examined bullying at Rockport, an elite boys' preparatory school, through a series of PAR studies. Action research teams of faculty and students critically interrogated power structures at the school, focusing specifically on masculine hegemony.

By creating "safe spaces" through the collaborative research process, participants co-constructed knowledge and questioned the dominant culture of their institution (Stoudt, 2007). Participants examined how language and discourse in the school community reinforced privilege and power structures related to bullying. For example, participant researchers studied locker room practices and hazing traditions that privileged traditional heterosexual male dominance and marginalized "less masculine" students. Students and teachers, working in separate research

teams, developed data collection instruments, conducted interviews, and analyzed data to construct a critical understanding of their school community. The research process itself increased critical consciousness in participants by making them aware of the language, norms, and patterns that typically go unseen and unquestioned (Stoudt, 2009). In interviews after the action research process, both students and teachers reported that they saw masculine hegemony and bullying infused in the school environment where they previously had not noticed it.

In what may be the only existing study on disrupting white privilege through participatory action research, Cullen (2008) similarly engaged five white university students in a critical examination of racial privilege. The goal of the study was to increase students' awareness of white privilege through a 30-hour group process involving dialogue and activities. Participants worked together to define concepts like white privilege and racism, and they shared experiences from their own lives to explore such concepts. Participants took an increasingly active role in their self-study, developing and engaging in activities that emerged out of the process, such as inviting non-white students to dialogue with them during one session.

Cullen studied the change in participants' awareness of white privilege using interviews, observations, journals, and survey methods to triangulate his data collection. Pre- and post-intervention interviews indicated that participants were more aware of and more comfortable discussing white privilege after engaging in the action research process. Cullen used an established scale to measure participants' attitudes toward white privilege before and after the PAR process. The questionnaire collected data on factors related to denying, understanding, feeling guilty about, and being willing to confront white privilege. For example, one question asked about participants' level of agreement with the statement "Plenty of people of color are more privileged than Whites." Survey results indicated inconsistent change, with some

participants' scores changing significantly after the action research process while others remained constant. Meeting observations and reflection journals provided greater detail about the stages in the process of action research on privilege. Journals and meeting notes provided data on participants' feelings of guilt and their difficulty translating ideas into concrete action strategies.

Cullen's main findings were that students developed increased critical consciousness of their white privilege, felt increasingly comfortable speaking about white privilege, and became more oriented toward taking action as a result of their participatory action research. His study, like Stoudt's Rockport bullying study, offers guidance for further examinations of privilege using PAR or collaborative inquiry.

Disrupting class privilege through inquiry

Few PAR or collaborative inquiry studies have specifically examined socioeconomic privilege or exclusion. In a large-scale PAR study addressing economic inequality, researchers engaged 40 students from across New York City in an examination of disadvantage and privilege (Stoudt, Fox, & Fine, 2012). Student researchers developed a survey instrument to study injustice in school, health care, housing, and criminal justices across the city. Students then presented their research through interactive dramatic performances to engage fellow community members in recognizing and questioning their class privilege. Fine and Burns (2003) similarly engaged 70 youth researchers in a study of inequality and the achievement gap in New York City high schools. Through the PAR process, Fine and Burns observed poor students "shedding shame" and affluent students abandoning "system justification" (p. 854). Such studies are important contributions in the effort to disrupt class privilege, but they overlook the role of particular fields, like students' own schools, in reinforcing privilege and excluding low SES students.

Mapping the privileged field of an elite school. Action research studies have yet to directly examine an elite school's class-based climate, which typically reinforces class privilege and excludes non-affluent students. Existing studies on increasing critical consciousness of masculine hegemony and white privilege through PAR provide promising templates for critically examining class privilege in similar ways. And PAR studies have successfully engaged community members in mapping the social landscape of a school in non-elite contexts. Cassie (2011) used PAR to study how middle school students at a predominantly Hispanic public school understand their school environment as having safe and unsafe spaces. Using photography and mapmaking, the study engaged students in critically examining violence and ethnic boundaries in their own school community. Such methods could translate to an elite environment to "map" the privileged socioeconomic terrain of predominantly affluent schools.

Among PAR studies on privilege, my project filled the gap between studies that have effectively mapped masculine hegemony at an elite school, engaged white students in critical examinations of their white privilege, and empowered students of varied class backgrounds in the study of economic injustice in the broader society. By examining a single school's socioeconomic climate, my study sought to increase participants' awareness by making visible the norms, practices, and discourse that reinforce class privilege and exclude non-affluent students.

Conclusion

Lower SES students in affluent schools lack a sense of belonging, which relates positively to motivation, self-efficacy, psychological health, and academic outcomes. As public and private schools increase socioeconomic diversity, the exclusion of lower SES students in predominantly affluent schools becomes a more pressing problem (Crosnoe, 2009; Kahlenberg,

2007). Absent a strong sense of belonging, lower SES students in wealthy schools miss out on key benefits offered by such institutions (Crosnoe, 2009). Research on the experience of lower SES students in elite schools indicates a need for critical examination of the school environments themselves (Bergerson, 2007; McLoughlin, 2012). Collaborative inquiry in affluent school environments offers a promising strategy for exposing privilege and increasing class consciousness of community members to ultimately increase belonging for low SES students (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010; Stoudt, 2009).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Introduction

This action research project engaged community members in studying their own school culture to understand and address class-based exclusion. The study ultimately explored what the team learned about the problem, their recommendations for improvement, and the extent to which the collaborative inquiry process changed participants' views of the problem.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What does a collaborative inquiry team of students and adults identify as the most salient expressions and causes of class-based exclusion at the school, and what recommendations do they make to address the problem?
2. How and to what extent does the action research process influence participants' views of class-based exclusion at the school?

Research Design

This study required qualitative methods because its goals was to understand participants' views and experiences, which are best examined through rich description. A quantitative approach was not able to capture in depth the process and impact of action research (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative methods used in participants' natural setting, in this case a particular school environment, encourages authentic participant behavior and also allows me to collect data over the course of the entire project (Creswell, 2013). This project examined how an action research team discussed, learned about, and developed solutions to a problem; careful observation of team

meetings in the school setting provided a thorough, authentic way to gather data on the action research process itself.

I used a pre- and post-intervention questionnaire to triangulate interview data on changes to participants' attitudes over the course of the project, but the remainder of the study was qualitative. Qualitative methods let participants provide more detailed descriptions of their views of the problem before and after action research, parts of the process that influenced their thinking, and their experiences working with the group. A quantitative design would pre-determine criteria for participants' attitude changes and would confine such data to numerical measures; but a qualitative design lets participants describe their own experience in their own language (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2013).

Further, since privilege and habitus go unseen in elite environments, traditional qualitative methods were insufficient for this study (Howard, 2008; McIntosh, 2012). Interviews or focus groups alone likely would not be able to fully explore and disrupt deeply rooted values, norms, and assumptions about class, particularly those of privileged individuals. Instead, I used an action research approach to engage community members in collaborative inquiry; the team's research process was an intervention aimed at shifting the cognitive frames of participants themselves.

With a traditional qualitative design, data collection and analysis also would have been limited by the single researcher lens. While I was the sole researcher formally collecting and analyzing data to answer my research questions, participants were informal researchers of their own school culture. Action research of this nature draws on the experiences, observations, and perspectives of diverse stakeholders, which expanded our understanding of the school's class-based landscape.

Beyond widening the scope of data collection and empowering community members, action research also produces concrete improvement in the organization (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). Past case studies have provided a relatively thorough understanding of the low SES student experience in affluent schools, so schools can begin working toward change (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003; McLoughlin, 2012; Stoudt, 2009). Action research allowed members of the school community to construct localized knowledge about the problem and develop solutions collaboratively (Reason & Bradbury, 2013), an appropriate step considering existing knowledge about the issue.

Site and Participants

The site for this study was a socioeconomically integrated, predominantly affluent school. While the site had to be a privileged environment in which low SES students lack a sense of belonging, a commitment to diversity and inclusion was also important. To implement an action research study, I needed participants to have some interest in improving the school environment around class privilege and exclusion. Private day schools offered promising sites for this study. Such schools are predominantly affluent and tend to be environments of privilege, but some students receive financial aid and commute to school from non-affluent areas. Independent schools also tend to have an explicit commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Hamilton School, a K-12 independent day school in the Los Angeles area, reflects these criteria. One in six students at Hamilton receives financial aid and the rest pay full tuition, which is $31,835 per year for grades 9-12. A selective, tuition-based independent school located in a very wealthy area of L.A., Hamilton represents an upper class setting with affluent norms. However, Hamilton is also a school with an explicit commitment to diversity and financial aid,

making it an ideal site for action research aimed at understanding and addressing the problem of class-based exclusion.

Hamilton is also representative of national independent school trends regarding socioeconomic diversity. Like other independent schools, Hamilton faces the challenge of creating an inclusive community in which low-income students feel a sense of belonging and effectively addressing issues related to socioeconomic class. A 2009 study of Hamilton's climate, the NAIS Assessment of Inclusivity and Multiculturalism (AIM), indicated a number of "high priority" concerns connected to socioeconomic diversity (Hamilton AIM Survey, 2009). Similarly, an alumni survey of classes from 1982 to 2007 found that Hamilton alumni were dissatisfied with how Hamilton educated them about socioeconomic diversity (Hamilton Alumni Survey, 2007). Peer schools face similar challenges, meaning research at this site is relevant to other sites.

The problem of class-based exclusion exists at Hamilton and reflects the factors described in literature on affluent schools and low SES students' sense of belonging. A pilot study conducted at Hamilton in December 2014 found that low SES students lack a sense of belonging at the school (Johnson, 2014). An 18-item questionnaire sent to 360 9th-12th graders (49% response rate) indicated that SES variables, such as whether a student receives financial aid, relate to factors of school belonging, such as relationships with faculty. Survey results indicated a statistically significant relationship ($p<.05$) between students receiving financial aid and students reporting that they strongly disagree or disagree with the statement "I feel like I belong or 'fit in' at Hamilton."

Students who receive financial aid were also significantly less likely to say they felt comfortable going to a teacher for academic help, reflecting the issue of limited help-seeking

behavior of low SES students in affluent schools (Calarco, 2014). Students who reported riding the bus to school rather than driving were significantly less likely to say they felt comfortable going to an adult on campus for help with a personal problem. Riding the bus was also significantly related to not fitting in and feeling unable to be oneself at school. Finally, students who reported that expense has been a barrier to participation in school activities or trips were significantly less likely to report feeling like they fit in at Hamilton. The pilot study indicated that low SES students at Hamilton face many forms of exclusion described in the literature on affluent schools, making it an appropriate site for my study.

Access. I had access to Hamilton as an employee of the school, and administrators gave permission for my study. Because the school seeks to expand financial aid and increasingly diversify its student body, Hamilton was particularly interested in fostering inclusion. Senior administrators have spoken to the faculty about wanting to develop a more open discourse around socioeconomic class. The school encourages relatively open discussions of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, but socioeconomic class remains an uncomfortable, taboo subject.

Participants. Participants in this study included 12 people from the student body, faculty, and administration. Students comprised the majority, 8 participants, as they make up the majority of the school and heavily influence the school culture. Students also likely understand the problem better than adults and were able to provide insights about diverse SES experiences at the school, across different contexts (e.g. sports teams, social events, and online activity).

Students on the team represented a range of SES and positions at the school. Sara, Marisol, Amani, and Michelle were seniors; Paul and Jess were juniors; and Elias and Sophia were sophomores. Michelle, Paul, and Marisol reported receiving financial aid, while the others'

families pay full tuition. Michelle, a senior, identified as middle class and relied on some financial aid after transferring to Hamilton from public school as a junior. Paul, a junior, received a named scholarship that covers the majority of tuition; he identified as lower-middle SES. Marisol, a senior, identified as very low SES (working poor). She came to Hamilton through a recruiting program that connects low SES students with independent schools. The others, Sara, Amani, Jess, Elias, and Sophia, all identified as upper-middle class or high SES. While several noted that there were students at Hamilton from families wealthier than theirs, they all identified as being on the upper end of the spectrum.

Joining the eight students was the Dean of Students, the Director of Financial Aid, a staff member, and a classroom teacher. It was important to recruit adults from different areas of the school. In particular, I sought out the two administrators because their involvement in the project would increase the likelihood of future implementation of the group's recommendations. The classroom teacher and staff member added different perspectives of student life at Hamilton.

Erin, Jack, Shonda, and Alicia were the four adult participants. As the Dean of Students, Erin has a broad and deep understanding of student culture and activities at Hamilton. She also plays a leadership role with student clubs, disciplinary issues, the advisory program, and student support services. Erin describes her background as upper-middle class; she attended a school similar to Hamilton as a student and did not receive financial aid. Similarly, Jack comes from a high SES background and grew up near Hamilton, an overwhelmingly affluent neighborhood. While both Erin and Jack note that their career choices have lowered their SES, they still possess an upper-class habitus.

Shonda is the registrar by title but a jack-of-all-trades support staff member in practice. She serves as a grade-level advisor, makes and changes students' schedules, maintains

transcripts, and sits in a central point of the school; students frequently visit with her casually or come to her for support. Shonda reports coming from a very low SES background and continues to identify as part of the working poor.

Alicia is the Director of Financial Aid at Hamilton. As such, she had a unique vantage point on the project and was unusually well versed in and educated about socioeconomic diversity at Hamilton. While I did not anticipate significant change on her part through the process, she was an invaluable resource for the team as we encountered questions about financial aid. She is also in a position to make changes to financial aid practices based on the team's recommendations. Alicia identifies as coming from a lower-middle class background.

Race was not the focus of the study, but race is in some ways tied up with SES, and racial dynamics inevitably influenced the group's discussions of SES. Though not an intentional part of my selection criteria, racial diversity was a feature of the group. Six of the 12 participants were white. The six non-white participants came from diverse backgrounds and ethnic or racial groups, including African American, Middle Eastern, Latino, Indian, Brazilian, and Asian. Group discussions at times involved participants self-identifying racially and exploring how racial or ethnic identity intersected with SES at Hamilton.

Recruitment. I directly recruited Erin and Alicia, the two administrators on the team, via email in August 2015. I then presented my project to the full faculty at the start of the school year. Shonda and Jack expressed interest in the project, and I selected them from several other interested faculty and staff because they represented diverse areas of the upper school and also came from different SES backgrounds themselves.

I announced my project to upper school students at an assembly in September 2015. I then held an information session for interested students, which provided more detail about the

project and the time commitment. I provided a one-page application that collected students' names, grade level, information about their objective and subjective SES.

I selected student participants using stratified non-random sampling so that the group was relatively equally balanced with regards to SES, even though the community itself is predominantly affluent. This reduced the likelihood that lower SES students would feel outnumbered, as they are in the broader school environment, and therefore made them more likely to speak openly about their experience and ideas. I also selected only students in tenth, eleventh, or twelfth grade because ninth graders would likely not have sufficient knowledge about the upper school culture and may not have the intellectual capacity or maturity for participatory action research. I aimed for a relatively even number of students from each of the three grades as well as a balance between boys and girls.

I informed selected participants via email and provided them with consent forms. I sent an informational packet home with student participants, providing parents with an overview of the project, the time commitment, and a consent form, which they signed and returned. All participants received a $25 Amazon gift card, and I encouraged students to include their action research work on college applications. They did not receive class credit, but they could treat their participation as they would membership in a school club or service project.

During the action research process, participants informally collected data from the broader school community. While the entire faculty and student body were not direct participants in my study, they were the "subjects" for the participant researchers. However, such data from the broader school community was not treated as data in my own project; my data came directly from participants themselves.

Research Methods

Data Collection

To study the action research process itself and determine how participants' thinking shifted, I observed all team meetings and also treated all planning-related communications (e.g. e-mail) as data. By recording meeting observations through field notes, I tracked how the action research process unfolded at each point in the cycle and what the team discovered about the sources of the problem. I used an observation protocol to ensure consistency in my observations, splitting my observations between descriptive and reflective notes (Merriam, 2009). For example, I collected data on points of disagreement between participants, decisions arrived at by the group, and my own interpretation of the tone of each meeting.

As participant researchers engage in the action research cycle, they kept journals to reflect on their experience; journals were in the form of individual Google forms, which allowed participants to type and easily share their entries with me in a format that facilitates analysis. I tried to devote time at the end of each meeting to journaling, but occasionally participants filled out the journal on their own after they left. Participants also produced planning documents, such as brainstorming sheets and research design draft charts. I referred back to such data to understand the action research phases, decisions made by the team, and the ideas that emerged through collaborative inquiry.

I conducted pre and post interviews with all team members to determine how and to what extent there were changes in participants' thinking about the problem of class-based exclusion at the school. Pre and post interview protocols consisted of similar questions to gauge how participants' understandings of and attitudes toward class privilege and exclusion changed. In

post interviews, after asking the same set of questions as in pre interviews, I also asked participants to explicitly reflect on the action research experience.

Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes each and took place in areas of the school that were comfortable for the individual (e.g. a teacher's own office, a private classroom for students). I audio recorded interviews using both an iPhone and my laptop. To triangulate my interview data, I also used a pre- and post-process survey, adapted from established measures of attitudes toward economic injustice and privilege (Seider, 2011). The survey consisted of Likert-scale questions (strongly disagree ranging to strongly agree) because I wanted to measure participants' movement on each question pre and post. With such a small sample, a quantitative survey provides limited data, but I was able to analyze particular participants' responses on pre- and post-intervention surveys to determine changes on the individual level as well as common changes for sub-groups, such as higher SES student participants.

Data Analysis

Consistent with good qualitative research practice, I began data analysis at the start of the process and continued it in an emergent, ongoing manner throughout the AR cycles (Herr & Anderson, 2014). I used narrative data analysis for data connected to research question one, which deals with the findings and recommendations of the collaborative inquiry group; I used a coding approach for research question two, which asks about changes in participants' attitudes over the course of the study. As I describe in chapter four, my data analysis approaches for my two research questions merged slowly as I realized that findings for my first question (what participants learned and recommended) influenced findings for my second (how participants' thinking changed).

Narrative analysis. I analyzed observation notes, team documents, and

participant journals using a narrative approach, ultimately constructing a story of how the action research process unfolded, what the team learned about the problem, and the recommendations they developed. I first organized data into phases of action research (planning, acting, observing, and reflecting); specifically, I identified group decisions about their own research questions, inquiry methods, interpretations, and findings/recommendations.

Coding/thematic analysis. I coded pre-intervention interviews for themes related to participants' views of the problem of class-based exclusion at the school. I did preliminary coding of pre interviews after conducting them in September 2015, but my coding changed as I analyzed post interviews. Ultimately I paired each participant's pre and post interview transcripts and coded for each individual's changes in thinking.

Codes included specific activities mentioned by participants, such as international trips and social events like prom. I clustered such codes into broader categories; for example, trips and activities became the category "tangible experience gap." There were shared codes across participants, but I treated each participant as unique in my analysis, focusing on how that particular person shifted. I then began to notice themes shared by the entire team and by certain sub-groups, such as lower SES student participants.

To analyze survey data from pre and post questionnaires, I looked for changes in mean scores for each Likert-scale question. Since the survey was simple and supplemented more extensive interview data, I did not run statistical tests. I created a spreadsheet to determine the range of scores and averages across the entire group; I also compared each individual's pre survey response to his or her post responses, taking note of how each participant moved. Finally, I clustered sub-groups, such as higher SES student participants, to determine how their scores

changed as compared to changes for other sub-groups. Survey data ultimately served to corroborate or contradict interview data.

The Action Research Process

Results from the pilot study conducted at the site (Johnson, 2014) were the starting point for the action research team. As described above, the pilot study examined the relationship between SES and school belonging variables. Survey results indicated that low SES students feel significantly less belonging at Hamilton compared to their high SES peers. The pilot study began to diagnose the problem, making it the first step in the first cycle of action research (Coghlan & Brannick, 2001). The goal of the action research team was to uncover the sources of the problem and develop solutions. We met ten times for approximately an hour each, starting in September 2015 and ending in January 2016. Meetings were held in a Hamilton classroom during a period that is used for faculty professional learning communities and student activities.

The team generally followed a typical action research cycle of "plan, act, observe, reflect" (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014). As a participatory action research team engaged in collaborative inquiry, our cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting followed the steps of conducting research: background learning, research design, data collection and analysis, and developing findings and recommendations. The following description of the action research process follows the stages of research conducted by the team.

Phase One: Background Learning

The first phase of our inquiry involved learning broadly about socioeconomic diversity and class-based exclusion. Such background learning enabled the team to contextualize the school's problem and consider how to frame their own research. At our first meeting, the team examined data from my December 2014 pilot study at Hamilton, which showed that low levels

of belonging correlated with low SES (Johnson, 2014). I also provided my own literature synthesis on class-based exclusion at affluent schools, which participants read for our second meeting and discussed.

Phase one also included personal background learning, as it was important for participants to fully understand their own SES before researching SES-related problems at the school. At our second meeting, I provided an excerpt from Cookson (2013) that described the social class landscape in the U.S. today, a glossary of terms related to SES, and a link to a New York Times interactive tool to calculate one's own socioeconomic status. Participants spent time exploring their own SES; sharing with the group was not required, but we loosely discussed what participants noticed or learned.

Though not directly linked to the research, an important element of phase one was the bonding of the group. At the first meeting, two students who had attended an annual conference on diversity and equity held by the National Association of Independent schools walked the group through discussion norms, such as "Speak from the I perspective" and "Honor confidentiality" (NAIS). I brought snacks to each meeting, and we allowed a few minutes at the start to catch up and visit. While the first few meetings were quiet, participants became noticeably more comfortable, laughing and chatting with each other as meetings went on. This spilled outside the formal meetings, too. When some participants wanted to keep discussing the literature review after our second meeting, they set up an optional lunch discussion to continue the conversation. In short, the first three meetings and the surrounding time helped the group make connections and get more comfortable with one another, as well as learn about the problem we were about to study.

Phase Two: Research Design

To initiate the research design phase, I devoted our third meeting to brainstorming in small groups. I provided poster-sized butcher block paper, divided into quadrants with a question in each box: How do we "see" class or SES at Hamilton? What are some categories for those items in box one (e.g. academic, social)? How might we explain the "fit gap," with only 18% of financial aid students saying they fit in at Hamilton? What are we curious about with regards to SES and belonging at Hamilton? I split the team into four mixed groups, and the groups discussed each question as they jotted down notes on the big sheets of paper.

After the brainstorming, I gave each participant a blank "design draft" template and asked them to write down ideas for our research questions, the types of data we might want to collect, and how we might make sense of or analyze such data. I proposed two research questions for the group to use as a starting point, knowing that developing research questions would be challenging and could easily overwhelm participants or derail the process. The initial research questions focused on causes of and recommendations for improving class-based exclusion, and the group revised and added to my original questions (see research design below).

The design draft templates included an overview of different data collection tools (Efron & Ravid, 2013). As we developed and agreed on our research design, I incorporated brief lessons about the advantages and disadvantages of different types of data; procedures for using various data collection methods, such as conducting focus groups as compared to interviews; and goals of and approaches to data analysis. Between the third and fourth meetings, I reviewed the 12 design drafts and synthesized them into a single research design proposal. The vast majority of design drafts included focus groups, with participants indicating that we needed rich, descriptive data to understand the source of class-based exclusion. Several drafts also suggested

observations of daily school "stuff" in order to gain insight into the school's social geography, an idea that evolved into an "embedded observation log" to track ongoing SES-related comments and moments.

At our fourth and fifth meetings, we reviewed, adjusted, and agreed on my synthesized research design proposal. The group agreed on the following research questions to guide our collaborative inquiry:

1. What are the most significant expressions, experiences, and sources of class-based exclusion at Hamilton?
2. To what extent are faculty and higher SES students aware of how SES affects all students' experiences at Hamilton? What is the level of class consciousness or "SES awareness," and how can we increase it?
3. What are the barriers to discussing SES openly at Hamilton, and how can we encourage more open discussion of SES?

The team decided to focus our inquiry on upper school students and adults who work directly with students. Some participants wanted to include alumni, parents, and other constituents, but we decided as a team to keep our focus narrow for now, and to consider including other groups in future waves of research. We chose to use focus groups and "embedded observation" to collect rich, qualitative data. The team felt that the pilot study provided sufficient quantitative data about the problem and that we now needed to "fill in the picture" with stories and descriptions. All members of the team particularly liked the idea of daily observations of school culture, which would track subtle comments and moments related to SES that typically go unnoticed. We also discussed plans for analysis, ultimately deciding that we would code and categorize our focus group notes and observation data to find patterns and

themes related to how class-based exclusion occurs at Hamilton. We summarized our research design in a chart (see appendix), which we referred back to frequently to keep our research on track.

At our fifth meeting, I gave participants a tutorial on running a focus group, and we developed plans and protocols for focus groups. I emphasized the central goal of collecting data that would answer our research questions -- I cautioned the team to avoid engaging in loose discussion, trying to change subjects' minds, or letting a single person dominate the focus group. We decided to aim for 4 to 7 participants per focus group, with two AR team members facilitating; our goal was to conduct 7 to 10 focus groups total. We estimated the focus groups would reach approximately 40 total members of the Hamilton upper school community, which we decided was an acceptable sample given our time constraints. I instructed participants to have one facilitator asking questions and managing the conversation, while the second took detailed notes, as close to verbatim as possible. We discussed holding focus groups in quiet, private, comfortable locations and aiming for 30 to 45 minutes per session.

I provided participants with a loose introductory script for the focus groups, which explained the purpose of our research and stated that subjects' names would not be used. Students developed six questions for their focus group protocol, and adults developed five questions. Both protocols focused on questions about where subjects saw or experienced gaps based on SES throughout the school culture. We kept focus group protocols and a document with reminders about conducting focus groups in a shared Google Drive folder. I asked participants to put focus group notes in the same folder, which allowed us to collaboratively review and analyze such data.

I also created an embedded observation log document and shared it in the same folder. The embedded observation document included reminders at the top about the goal of collecting such data: "Track how SES shows up in the daily life of the upper school. Where do we notice class or SES at Hamilton? What's the "social geography" of class?" I also included a reminder: "Observations do not need to be negative; take note of positive SES-related events, comments, moments as well as problematic or exclusionary moments." The log was organized as a table, with columns for the observer's initials, approximate day and time of the observed moment, location (e.g. classroom, online), and a description of what happened. At the top of the description column (labeled "What was observed"), I included a reminder to "avoid interpretation or judgment; stick to the facts; do not use names or other identifiers."

The research design phase highlighted what became a trend in our action research cycle: the ebb and flow of a collective feeling of being overwhelmed. The group first felt overwhelmed upon reading the literature synthesis, with several participants noting that the problem we were attempting to study seemed so huge that it was hard to imagine pinning down the problem and meaningfully addressing it at Hamilton. The optional lunch discussion of the literature review and further brainstorming for our research calmed the collective anxiety. As we discussed the literature review, for example, some participants felt it would be impossible to understand and address all the problems related to the fuzzy concepts of "field" and "habitus"; other participants and I pointed out, though, that we should not try to address all aspects of the issue of class-based exclusion, and that we would not be able to change the school culture in one semester, nor should we try. I regularly narrowed our focus and brought participants back to concrete goals we could accomplish, such as determining some key ways in which SES limited a Hamilton student's experience, and developing meaningful recommendations for those specific issues.

As we sketched out possibilities for our research design, participants again seemed to get overloaded by our options and wanted to take on too much. I addressed this wave by significantly whittling down the ideas participants submitted in their design drafts. For example, some participants wanted to include alumni and parents in our research, but I suggested we begin with students and teachers, and leave other constituents to potential subsequent waves of research. The pattern continued into data analysis, when participants felt inundated with data, and the recommendation stage, when the group had moments of being overly ambitious in developing solutions. At each stage, I synthesized and distilled ideas between meetings; I then presented more limited options or suggestions at the following meeting, while still gaining consensus before moving forward.

Phase Three: Data Collection & Analysis

Data collection occurred outside meetings, mostly between sessions five and seven. The team collected data through two methods: focus groups and an embedded observation log, which tracked daily, ongoing observations of moments or comments related to SES at Hamilton. Students and adults added to the embedded observation log on an ongoing basis; the document was shared as a Google Document so that all participants could edit it. All but one participant contributed at least one observed moment or comment to the observation log.

Students from each grade led at least one focus group each, with students from their grade; some focus groups were mixed SES, and some were homogenous. Erin led a focus group with administrators, including the directors of the upper and middle schools, the director of community service, and the director of outdoor education. Shonda and Alicia led a focus group with staff members, and Jack led a focus group with classroom teachers. The team used a similar protocol, which asked subjects to discuss how they see SES affecting students' lives at Hamilton,

the degree to which SES is openly discussed at Hamilton, and areas for improvement. Throughout the data collection stage, the group discussed incoming data and revised data collection tools as necessary (e.g. adjusting focus group questions).

We analyzed our focus group and observation data by coding for emergent themes. I provided the group with an example of coded focus group notes at our eighth meeting, using codes that had emerged through ongoing discussion of our data, such as "academic disadvantages," "SES as taboo," and "assumptions that all are affluent." The group suggested other codes, such as "wealth justification," and engaged in coding their own focus group notes. We collaboratively coded the embedded observation log, identifying comments that were actively judgmental, ignorantly assuming wealth, showing off affluence through brands or toys, etc.

Between meetings eight and nine, I collected and synthesized participants' rough coding to develop preliminary themes and findings. At our ninth meeting, the group reviewed and revised the draft findings and began discussing recommendations. At our final official meeting, the group finalized recommendations and began plans for reporting out to faculty and the larger school community. As is typical of action research, the process was not entirely neat, and the group left open the possibility of continuing future cycles that could pick up where our work "ended." Many team members commented at our last official meeting that we seemed to be only at the beginning of a larger process. Still, all participants expressed satisfaction with our final recommendations, as the initiatives seemed to respond to some of our more important findings.

Phase Five: Reporting Out

The group met two additional times, beyond the ten scheduled meetings, to plan a presentation to the faculty, which took place in early March 2016. The team agreed that students

should lead the presentation, as faculty typically seem more eager to hear directly from students rather than from other adults. I provided the team with a draft outline of a presentation that would summarize our research process, findings, and recommendations. Student participants volunteered to present different sections, and they prepared the details of their respective parts.

Students also met once to record audio voiceovers of the embedded observation data and craft a short film that would bring some of that data to life. Two student participants volunteered to create the short film, which used still photos from around campus and the audio recreations of the embedded observation data to display the subtle forms of class-based exclusion that occur throughout the school culture. The students showed the video as part of their presentation to the faculty.

Later in March 2016, I led a faculty workshop during a professional development day, using the group's research as a starting point for a discussion of socioeconomic inclusion at Hamilton. Students showed their short film at an upper school student assembly in April 2016, when they announced the SES-related affinity group. In short, the work of the action research team has continued beyond the conclusion of my formal study.

Role Management

As an employee of Hamilton School, I had to manage my role as an insider at the study site. Since I was an action research facilitator and team member while also acting as a researcher studying the process itself, it was important that I effectively balanced these roles. I informed participants of my position as a graduate student at UCLA and told them about the goals of the study at the start. However, I also participated actively in discussions and shared my own stories, experiences, and identity to build trust and a peer relationship with my fellow AR team members.

Finally, as a white woman from a relatively privileged background, I had to be aware of how my own characteristics and identity affected the process. I attended an elite boarding school and an Ivy League university. My father was a lawyer and my mother was a public school teacher. My parents expressed financial concerns throughout my childhood, and I learned as an adult that they took on substantial loans to pay for my education. In both high school and college, the wealth I saw around me made my comfortable suburban background feel quaint. I did not qualify for financial aid, though, and I remain privileged in the broader context of American society. In this sense, I identify with a world of privilege but also feel apart from the most elite upper-class habitus.

I believe my background allowed me as a researcher to navigate somewhat between SES groups, although ultimately I align more closely with wealthier students in terms of my own background. While race did not factor directly into my study, it is inevitably wrapped up with socioeconomic class, and thus I also needed to be conscious of my whiteness, particularly since there were participants of color in the action research group. Consistent with good action research practice (Herr & Anderson, 2014), I kept a researcher journal throughout the process to remain aware of my perceptions and potential biases.

Credibility and Ethics

Ethical considerations with action research are substantial, particularly when the topic is socioeconomic class and privilege and the project involves students. To ensure the wellbeing of participants, I maintained strict confidentiality throughout the process and used pseudonyms for the site and all participants in this manuscript. In addition to gaining informed consent, I discussed confidentiality norms at the first AR team meeting. I devoted a significant portion of

that first meeting to discussions of avoiding judgment, speaking honestly, and building a respectful environment within the group.

I also collected data through electronic journals to ensure confidentiality and privacy. Any information collected by participants and shared with the team did not leave the group. I closely monitored the AR process to ensure that participants were emotionally safe, particularly low SES students who may have felt vulnerable discussing their experience. In fact, higher SES students tended to express the most discomfort and guilt throughout the process, and I occasionally followed up with individual students after reading their journals; such conversations helped to make students feel more comfortable and encourage continued participation.

The greatest threat to credibility for this project was reactivity. Participants knew the goals of the project and could have skewed their responses, particularly in the post interviews, to indicate a positive change through the process. To address this credibility threat, I triangulated my data collection methods. In addition to interviews, I used participants' journals, team meeting observations, and a questionnaire to provide a more complete picture of the extent to which the action research process changes participants' attitudes. The pre- and post-intervention questionnaire provided useful quantitative data about changes in participants' views and attitudes, which I used to support or complicate findings from interview data.

Another threat to credibility was my own bias and the small sample size. I carefully documented the entire process through consistent data collection methods and used systematic data analysis to avoid inserting my own bias. I sought member checks to ensure that I was accurately interpreting my data, and I had peers review some of my interview transcripts to check for accuracy in my own coding and categorizing. My coding aligned with that of peer reviewers.

The small sample size is a typical feature of action research; to some extent, findings from action research are inevitably limited in their generalizability, as the AR process is unique to the particular participants and setting. However, my sample selection process insured that there was at least internal generalizability (that is, participants' experience was likely similar to how other participants from within the same site would engage in the same process). Detailed data collection through interviews, journals, surveys, and observation, as well as a careful documentation of every step of the process, also allowed for the action research process to be replicated at a similar school, possibly with similar results.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Introduction

This study engaged twelve students and adults at Hamilton School in a five-month participatory action research process to address class-based exclusion. The action research team worked together to develop their own research questions, conduct focus groups and daily observations of the school culture, analyze the data, develop findings, and craft recommendations.

The first goal of the project was for the group to determine sources of class-based exclusion and make recommendations, using a collaborative inquiry approach. The project's overarching goal was to determine whether engaging in such collaborative research influenced participants' views of the problem. The team's own research largely reinforced what is already known about causes of class-based exclusion at affluent schools; but the changes in participants' thinking highlight new opportunities for disrupting privilege and increasing class consciousness among members of affluent school communities.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What does a collaborative inquiry team of students and adults identify as the most salient expressions and causes of class-based exclusion at the school, and what recommendations do they make to address the problem?
2. How and to what extent does the action research process influence participants' views of class-based exclusion at the school?

This chapter first briefly reviews the action research process. I then present findings organized by emergent themes, spanning both research questions. My two research questions

became increasingly intertwined as the study progressed; the answers to the first research question influenced answers to the second. The discoveries and recommendations of the action research team directly shaped individual participants' views of the problem. For this reason, I have identified themes that encompass the three prongs of my research questions: the different expressions and causes of class-based exclusion, as identified by the team; the recommendations made for that particular cause; and the associated changes in participants' thinking about the problem in that area.

"Making the invisible visible" describes the team's discoveries, recommendations, and changes in thinking around the subtle, cultural forms of exclusion based on SES. Over the course of the research, participants developed an "SES lens" they previously did not have, which allowed them to see SES in the culture where they had not seen it before. "The experience gap" explains how the team worked to understand and address the more tangible, visible ways that Hamilton students have access to different activities and experiences based on SES. Participants increasingly understood ways the school could shrink the experience gap between wealthy and non-wealthy students, whereas prior to the research they saw such a gap as inevitable.

The Action Research Process

The team generally followed a typical action research cycle of "plan, act, observe, reflect." As a participatory action research team engaged in collaborative inquiry, our cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting followed the steps of conducting research: background learning, research design, data collection and analysis, and developing findings and recommendations. We met ten times for approximately an hour each, starting in September 2015 and ending in January 2016. The following table provides an overview of each meeting. See chapter three for an expanded description of the action research process.

Table 1. Overview of Action Research Meetings

Research Phase	#	Date	Meeting Focus
Background Learning	1	9/23/15	Introductions; reviewed pilot study data
	2	10/8/15	Discussed literature review; learned SES vocabulary; self-identification activity
Research Design	3	10/15/15	Brainstorming SES at Hamilton; research design drafting
	4	10/29/15	Reviewed and adjusted synthesized research design draft
	5	11/5/15	Finalized research design; planned focus groups
Data Collection & Reflection	6	11/19/15	Reviewed data collected so far; adjusted research design
	7	12/10/15	Reflected on process so far; financial aid overview
Data Analysis	8	12/17/15	Initial coding and identification of themes in data
	9	1/7/16	Reviewed and discussed synthesized coding and proposed findings
Recommendations	10	1/14/16	Finalized findings and developed recommendations; made plans for reporting out

The team used focus groups and observations of daily school life to gather data on the problem of class-based exclusion. We analyzed such data using a coding/thematic approach to uncover causes of class-based exclusion at the school and shed light on the experience of lower SES students. The team ultimately developed recommendations based on their findings.

One of the group's key discoveries was that members of the community (adults and students) assumed that wealth was the norm at Hamilton. Such assumptions produced insensitive comments that created a culture from which lower SES were excluded. To address this source of the problem, the group produced a video that made visible the subtle comments about SES. The team also recommended an affinity group to empower lower SES students to feel central and

visible in the school culture. While affinity groups are not a new idea, few affluent schools have established affinity groups based on SES.

A second key discovery made by the group was that affluent students have a far richer Hamilton experience than their lower SES peers. The team's focus group data in particular revealed the wide gap between the experiences of higher and lower SES students, with wealthy students going on more trips and social outings, making use of tutors and test prep resources, and having access to better devices, cars, and other material goods. To respond to such a gap, the team suggested that the school ease the process of requesting additional financial aid, which is often available for "add on" items or experiences.

The discoveries made by the team largely reinforce the literature on affluent schools; the causes of class-based exclusion at Hamilton have been identified at similar institutions. What the literature has not shown is how individuals' thinking can change by learning about the problem through conducting their own collaborative research. As participants arrived at their own findings by collecting and analyzing their data, their thinking shifted and they became increasingly conscious of SES in the school culture. The following section describes my findings regarding the causes of class-based exclusion and recommendations, as identified by the group, and the corresponding shifts in participants thinking that occurred as they engaged in the research.

Findings

This section explores findings organized by major themes that emerged from my research, spanning both research questions. Each theme reflects a cause of class-based exclusion identified by the group (research question one), related recommendations made by the group

(research question one), and the shift in thinking experienced by participants in that area (research question two).

Findings emerged from my analysis of the following documents produced by the team: brainstorming charts, research design drafts, focus group notes, an "embedded observation" log, data coding and analysis documents, a final report of findings, and a presentation to the faculty, which included a short film produced by student participants. I also analyzed meeting observation notes, pre- and post-action research interviews and survey responses from all twelve participants, and participants' journal responses, which were done after each of the ten meetings.

Theme One: Making the Invisible Visible

The key cause of class-based exclusion identified by the group, the subtle but pervasive cultural expressions of affluence that exclude lower SES students from the social fabric of the school, also reflected the dominant shift in thinking by all members of the team. Participants changed from identifying only tangible, visible forms of exclusion, such as not being able to afford prom or international trips, to seeing microaggressions and cultural norms as excluding lower SES students on a daily basis. Data collected through focus groups and the team's embedded observation log revealed a culture of assumed wealth, which was regularly expressed in the form of microaggressions, or subtle, daily comments, that excluded or overlooked lower SES students. For example, observed comments like "Everyone at Hamilton's in the one percent" assumed wealth as the norm and excluded lower SES students from feeling like part of the culture. Most participants did not originally cite such comments as a form of class-based exclusion at Hamilton, but all participants identified them as a source of the problem after participating in the action research.

The team produced a video to make visible such SES-related microaggressions; they also proposed an affinity group for lower SES students to openly share experiences and make connections, thus increasing the visibility and presence of lower SES students in the school. The team's exploration of the subtle, invisible cultural elements that exclude lower SES students led to dramatic shifts in participants' thinking; while only lower SES participants identified SES microaggressions as a source of class-based exclusion prior to the action research process, all participants identified that problem by the end.

Finding #1 (RQ1 - cause): Assumptions & displays of wealth produce a culture of SES-related microaggressions that exclude low SES students

Throughout the study, only one member of the action research team used the term "microaggression." But the team's research revealed the subtle, daily comments and actions in the Hamilton culture that celebrated affluence and ignored, dismissed, or disparaged lower SES students. Observation data included comments such as: "There are two standards of rich, Hamilton rich, and what regular people think of as rich" and "Having a Birkin bag is like the ultimate life goal. That's when you know you've made it."

The team interpreted such data as reflecting a school climate that assumes and celebrates affluence; such a climate leads to regular comments that intentionally or unintentionally exclude lower SES students from the culture, a finding that is supported by the literature on affluent schools. The team logged 25 distinct comments or moments from November to mid-December 2015, averaging almost one observed moment per school day. Observation data fell into three categories: disparaging lower SES norms; showing off status symbols; and displaying ignorance or unawareness of lower SES students' experiences.

Three of the 25 observed comments directly disparaged or criticized lower SES experiences. When a student mentioned getting nice clothes from Target, another laughed, as if it were a joke. One student told a classmate about friends who were going to a local community college, and the classmate asked, "Why would anyone want to go there?" The team concluded that overtly judgmental or insulting comments about SES are rare at Hamilton. Most of the SES-related comments tended to be more subtle in the ways they excluded lower SES students from the culture.

Nine of the observed comments came in the form of displays of wealth or status symbols, often combined with some indication that such material wealth was emblematic of the school. One student was overheard saying his pen cost $100; another student replied, "That's so Hamilton." Several observed moments involved discussions or displays of expensive toys or brands; one participant observed a SnapChat showing a Hoverboard, with the caption "Just Hamilton Things." Focus group data similarly revealed a cultural norm of flaunting wealth to show status. One focus group subject noted, "When I was young I used to think I was very rich but Hamilton has made me feel less. At Hamilton it feels like I have to boast my wealth… I asked mom for a Cartier ring because someone else at school had one and I wanted to fit in."

The final and most prominent category of observed moments or comments involved inadvertent assumptions or ignorance about classmates' SES. Twelve of the 25 observed comments or moments fell into this category. For example, a student asked a peer why she submitted an assignment on paper rather than online, to which the peer replied, "I don't have a computer at home." Other comments included students recommending expensive SAT tutors and outside college counselors, or discussing ski trips and class outings to amusement parks and asking some students why they were unable to come.

Focus group data collected by participants supported the observations of assumed wealth. Comparing his Hamilton friends to other friends outside of school, one focus group subject said, "I assume my friends can go out for dinner, there's no hesitancy. Outside of Hamilton there is hesitancy. I can't have my [non-Hamilton] friend fly out to vacation with me because they can't afford it. I don't think about this until I'm outside of Hamilton." This student registered SES diversity only among his non-Hamilton peers, but at Hamilton he assumed a shared level of affluence.

Finding #2 (RQ1 - recommendation): Make the invisible visible by highlighting microaggressions and empowering lower SES students

After the team identified the culture of assumed wealth and microaggressions as a key source of class-based exclusion at Hamilton, many members of the group noted the difficulty in developing recommendations for such a deeply-rooted cultural problem. Shonda wrote in her journal after our ninth meeting, "[T]he assumption that most students at Hamilton are wealthy creates an environment where students, faculty and staff send messages that are dismissive and even offensive to students of lower SES… Inclusion at Hamilton, then, becomes much more challenging and in many ways impossible." The team recognized that there are not quick and easy ways to make cultural change.

During the ninth and tenth action research meetings, though, the group developed two approaches for "making the invisible visible": highlighting SES microaggressions in a video that displayed data from our embedded observation log and bringing together lower SES students in an affinity group. Although some participants were skeptical of our ability to shift the school culture, particularly when 80% of Hamilton families paid full tuition (and therefore *were* indeed affluent, justifying in some ways the assumption of wealth in the school culture), others

remained optimistic. Many in the group believed that if Hamilton students were more aware of how subtle comments excluded lower SES students and were more aware that lower SES students were present in large numbers at the school, the culture would shift.

The fundamental goal of both interventions/recommendations, then, was awareness. Most participants agreed that because the social atmosphere at Hamilton was generally inclusive and warm, it would be possible to shift the culture away from class-based exclusion if the community became more conscious of SES. In her post interview, Erin explained, "I really believe our students are such good people, and they care so deeply about each other at a very fundamental level, that if they knew that things they didn't even realize were happening made students feel less than included in our community, they maybe wouldn't change overnight, but they would be far more aware of those moments that can exclude." Jess echoed this sentiment in her journal after our ninth meeting: "Our goal should be more about awareness than anything… the people who care to be sensitive to others' feelings will try, and some won't, and to some extent I think that's all we can do… most of the comments people make are completely unintentional, so I feel pretty confident that if people are made aware they will try."

Building on such notions of awareness, Paul drew a connection between race consciousness at Hamilton and the group's goals for SES awareness. Discussing the group's recommendations in his post interview, he noted, "We talked a lot about bringing awareness, that's what we're trying to do with the video and the group, is making it something that people are more aware of, more on their radar, that they're more conscious of… Most students are conscious of race. They don't want to make an insensitive racial comment; it's part of the culture, part of the mindset at Hamilton." He went on, "I think if you can cultivate that mindset in students, hopefully it would lessen those [SES-related] comments you hear every day."

After developing rough plans for a video to highlight SES microaggressions, students met to record voiceovers of selected embedded observation data. All the student researchers worked together to agree on an outline for the video, and two students with editing skills produced it. The video began with key statistics from the December 2014 pilot study: one in six Hamilton students receives financial aid, and only 18% of financial aid students feel they fit in at Hamilton, compared to 43% of full-pay students. Text on the screen then says, "The following are actual comments overheard at Hamilton." Audio voiceovers pair with on-screen text to show four of the embedded observation moments, ending with the comment, "Well, obviously we're all in the one percent here." The audio and text overlay still shots of the Hamilton campus. The final screen reads: "Little comments add up. We all belong." The action research group showed the video to the faculty when they presented their research on March 2, 2016, and they also showed the video to Hamilton students when they announced the first meeting of the lower SES affinity group.

The recommendation to create a lower SES affinity group came overwhelmingly from students in the action research group, specifically the lower SES students themselves. Faculty participants expressed some initial concern that an affinity group may further marginalize lower SES students; but as we continued to discuss the idea, the team agreed that an affinity group, thoughtfully presented and constructed, could empower, connect, and make more visible lower SES students at Hamilton.

Paul and Marisol, who were both eager to organize and lead such a group, decided with the help of the rest of the team to present it as a group "for students whose Hamilton experience has been significantly limited by SES." The team debated whether to frame it as a group for financial aid students, but our research revealed exclusion felt by full-pay students whose

families could not afford "add-on" experiences beyond tuition. Financial aid would provide a clear line that would stop affluent students from joining, but the team ultimately agreed that a broader statement about SES limiting students' experiences would identify and include the appropriate individuals. Ultimately the group would be entirely optional and based on students' own self-identification.

As the team discussed the best ways to frame such a group, we identified several goals. First and foremost, the affinity group should serve the purpose of connecting lower SES students (and possibly faculty from lower SES backgrounds) to share experiences. As Michelle put it in her post interview, the best part for her of such a group would be "just knowing that you're not the only one that's feeling that way," meaning excluded or limited at Hamilton due to SES. Paul similarly described the group in his tenth journal entry as "A place where you get to see other faces and make those unique and meaningful connections to other faculty and students." He explained further in his post interview, "I think coming in as freshmen or sophomores, to have that group where it's like, 'Well, this is a new school, and the kids are rich here.' I've been there. That feeling where I don't really fit in, in that regard. It's hard to find a niche." In a school where lower SES students are the minority and feel excluded from the culture, an affinity group could serve the purpose of providing a space of belonging and shared experiences.

The second function of the lower SES affinity group would be to connect older and younger students in mentor relationships to help navigate the financial aid system, which I discuss in greater detail in a later section of this chapter. Third, the group would make SES, currently an invisible identifier at Hamilton, more visible to all students through announcements about the group at school assemblies and via email; SES would also become more visible through the group's potential participation alongside other affinity groups in school-wide

multicultural events and initiatives. As Paul explained, "We have a lot of affinity groups on campus: a black culture club, Hispanic culture club, gay-straight alliance, all that kind of stuff. The more I thought about the idea [of a lower SES group], the more I realized how important it is." Despite potential pitfalls and challenges of establishing a lower SES affinity group, the research team concluded that such a group could increase belonging for lower SES students and bring SES more to the surface as one of many elements of multiculturalism at Hamilton.

Finding #3 (RQ2 - changes in participants' views): All participants became more aware of subtle cultural elements or microaggressions that exclude low SES students.

Adult participants and higher SES students began the action research process largely blind to SES microaggressions or subtle, cultural forms of class-based exclusion. As the research progressed, they increasingly saw the way SES is expressed in the daily culture of Hamilton. After the research process concluded, all twelve participants identified such habitual comments or expressions of wealth in the culture as a major source of class-based exclusion at Hamilton. Lower SES student participants, too, became increasingly attuned to socioeconomic microaggressions, but they had recognized such forms of exclusion prior to participating in the action research. The following section first describes how all participants became more aware of SES microaggressions. I then describe in greater detail the unique changes experienced by lower SES and higher SES student participants as the research made SES more visible to each group in different ways.

"Eye-Opening": Seeing SES Where They Had Not Before. The three lower SES student participants were the only team members to note "little comments" or moments of subtle cultural exclusion based on SES prior to the action research. The other participants noted tangible forms of class-based exclusion prior to the action research, such as lower SES students

not being able to go on international trips, buy athletic team gear, afford high-end computers, or participate in on-campus activities outside of school hours because they take the bus. After the research process, all twelve participants pointed to ongoing daily comments that reflected a culture of assumed wealth as a key cause of class-based exclusion. Many referred to the embedded observation data, in particular, as "eye-opening," an apt metaphor for the invisible becoming visible through the research process.

Erin, the Dean of Students, focused in her pre interview largely on material or experiential forms of exclusion, such as lower SES students being excluded from early-morning activities due to having to take the bus to school. In her post interview, she reiterated such issues but went further: "There's the stuff that I felt before, which I described as the systemic or programmatic or scheduling things… but I think this process definitely highlighted the more subtle, daily things that happen, that I think are actually probably some of the bigger reasons why [lower SES students are excluded]." While she continued to acknowledge the more tangible, visible forms of exclusion, she became much more tuned into the less noticeable microaggressions. "The embedded observation log for me was the eye-opening thing," she noted in her post interview. "Just how many comments are made, or how much a lot of people in our community assume that everyone here is affluent, and the effect of those comments is significant."

Erin's second-to-last journal entry confirmed that the research process led her to see class-based exclusion where she had not before. "I totally underestimated the amount of 'hidden' or subtle daily messaging that students hear about issues related to SES. The embedded observation log is such a powerful representation of the 'one-off' (but constant) messages the students hear." She concluded, "When those add up, they become the implicit culture of the

school, which probably does as much damage as those more structural elements I had originally identified." Jack, the classroom teacher, similarly noted in his post interview that he began to notice more and more SES-related comments in his classes, so much so that "It was hard for me to keep track of so many of these things that I witnessed."

Shonda, the registrar, described in her post interview "having a heightened awareness about comments that other people make." She first noted the shift in her fourth journal entry, writing, "Even my own reception to nuanced conversations and situations I would have totally overlooked before has raised new awareness… even just among the research participants, learning more about the effects of SES has raised critical awareness that has made me more sensitive… in situations that we likely would have never been receptive to prior to participating in this research group." For her, the discussions of the group alone made her more tuned in, and such awareness continued for her as the group began collecting data through the embedded observation log.

Across the board, students also described microaggressions as a source of class-based exclusion in post interviews. They identified "little comments," "rude comments," "unintentionally dropped comments that could be seen as offensive," and "hurtful comments." Several students were able to articulate after the action research process precisely *how* such microaggressions produced exclusion. Sophia, a higher SES sophomore, explained in her post interview, "When other students don't know about diversity and socioeconomic status, it leads to really hurtful things to be said or generalizations to be made that end up impacting a student's entire experience here. That might seem really small, but it seems to flower out throughout their experience here." She went on:

> Some of the things that people would say, like 'We're all in the one percent' or just generalizations about what it means to be a student at Hamilton when in reality, looking at the data, it shows that those generalizations aren't true, and they lead to a pretty harmful erasure of a lot of people… they seem to almost silence students of lower SES where, because of that generalization, they might feel uncomfortable to say that they're not comfortable here, that they don't fit in.

Connecting microaggressions to the invisibility of lower SES students, Sophia was able to see through the research that subtle, seemingly small comments could significantly exclude or even "erase" members of the Hamilton community. By assuming affluence, the microaggressions implied that non-affluent Hamilton students were not truly part of the culture.

Elias, also a higher SES sophomore, developed a similarly nuanced understanding of the effect of microaggressions on the lower SES student experience. In his post interview, he explained that the daily comments were not intended to exclude but rather came from a place of ignorance about the range of SES at Hamilton. "That's where you get into, like, the people not feeling like they fit in, because if you're a student of lower SES, a comment like that is going to make you personally feel like, 'You're attacking me. You're singling me out, you're making me feel like I don't belong here. Like, you seem to be insinuating that everyone here should be THIS.' Even though they [the person making the comment] might not be trying to say that." Through the research, Elias was able to notice how comments that assume affluence would cause lower SES students to feel like outsiders in the community because they did not fit the Hamilton mold of wealth and privilege.

Survey data support the finding that all participants became more aware of subtle cultural elements and microaggressions that exclude lower SES students. On the survey statement "I

regularly notice practices, behaviors, or comments at school that intentionally or unintentionally exclude lower-income or non-wealthy students in some way," participants' level of agreement consistently rose from pre to post. The group's average prior to the action research was a 6 (on a 10-point scale, where 1 is strongly disagree and 10 is strongly agree), with a range of 1 to 8. On the post survey, the average was 8, with a range of 5 to 10. In other words, the whole group reported an increase in noticing such forms of exclusion, and they all became more clustered at the higher end of the scale, whereas they spanned a wide range at the start of the process.

Similarly, participants' level of agreement rose on the statement "For students of lower socioeconomic status to feel included at Hamilton, the school's culture needs to change." Prior to the action research the average level of agreement was 7, and after the action research it rose to 9. Again, the shift in the score range was noteworthy, with the range spanning from 1 to 10 across participants prior to the action research, and spanning just 5 to 10 post-action research.

However, as participants began to see the previously "invisible" forces of class-based exclusion, there were mixed feelings about just how serious or sensitive the problem was. Many participants noted the possibility of becoming hyper-sensitive to microaggressions or going too far by over-emphasizing the significance of SES. Sophia, Amani, and Jack, for example, noted in their post interviews that many moments from the embedded observation log were funny. Jack said in his post interview, "Some of the observations I would make were almost joking in some regards… jokes that were borderline or inappropriate." Sophia similarly noted, "Some of the things [we observed] were just so comical." Sophia went on to acknowledge, though, that "I would see that [comment] as something funny, but at the same time I need to remember that I see it from a privileged point of view."

Other participants, including lower SES students, similarly pointed out in their post interviews that we run the risk of over-emphasizing the importance of SES by excessively highlighting it. Students in particular commented in their post interviews that someone's SES is not good or bad, "it is what it is." Many developed a matter-of-fact approach to SES, becoming more comfortable discussing it and acknowledging it but stopping short of judgment, guilt, shame, or pity. As Amani said in her post interview, "It [SES] is there and we have to deal with it in a way that's not presented as incredible to be low socioeconomic class, but it's not exactly a sad thing that we cry about either. It's almost as if there's no emotion attached to it, because you're just dealt cards and you deal with it." While all participants became more attuned to subtle, less visible forms of SES exclusion, they continued to wrestle with issues around humor and sensitivity, and where the line exists for each.

Lower SES students: "I didn't know that happened to other people besides me."

Within the broader shift for all participants, lower and higher SES students experienced distinct changes in the way SES became more visible to them. Prior to the action research experience, all three lower SES students identified microaggressions as a source of class-based exclusion. Paul, Michelle, and Marisol, the three student participants who receive financial aid, all mentioned "little comments" they heard on a daily basis that highlighted affluence and subtly excluded non-wealthy students. In her pre interview, Marisol discussed jokes related to financial aid and less affluent neighborhoods. Michelle similarly noted the way some students "talk about the things that maybe you have that someone else doesn't… something that's not intentional but that could, in a way, be saying 'Oh, I have something that you don't.'"

Paul described listening to peers talk about their vacation house in a ski resort town. "It's just little conversations and comments," he explained in his pre interview. "Kids are not trying to

be spiteful, that's just their lives." Tuned into SES, the lower SES student participants came into the action research with some sense of the subtle cultural forces that keep non-wealthy students on the margins. As Paul explained in his pre interview, "Socioeconomics has been one of the lenses through which I've been able to see my Hamilton experience." For him and the other lower SES student participants, the invisible was already visible. In their post interviews, the three lower SES students continued to identify microaggressions as a source of exclusion.

Survey data support this consistency; the three lower SES students moved minimally on the survey statement: "I regularly notice practices, behaviors, or comments at school that intentionally or unintentionally exclude lower-income or non-wealthy students in some way." They began with responses of 8, 8, and 7 (for Marisol, Michelle, and Paul, respectively) on a 10-point scale, with 10 being "strongly agree." After the action research, they responded to the same statement with 9, 10, and 8 (for Marisol, Michelle, and Paul, respectively). All became more tuned into exclusionary moments, but they were quite high on the scale to begin.

What lower SES students did tend to note in journals and in their post interviews was no longer feeling like the only one who saw such moments. "I've been here three years and I've heard comments like that before," Paul said. "But I didn't know that happened to other people besides me, that I wasn't the only one hearing those things." Michelle and Marisol both noted that they heard the microaggressions even more after the action research than they previously did, and they were more struck by the harmfulness of such comments.

Higher SES students: "I've heard all those things… and I've probably said them, too." The experiences and changes of higher SES student participants also shared several common features as class-based exclusion went from invisible to visible. Prior to participating in the action research, higher SES students dismissed or downplayed the possibility of social

exclusion based on SES. In interviews before the action research, wealthier students focused on more tangible resources or experiences that lower SES students would not be able to access, such as newer computers, international trips, or academic tutors.

For example, Elias recognized that his parents paid for him to have a tutor in AP Chemistry, which he saw as contributing to his academic success. "And that is where a student who doesn't have the money to get a tutor in a class could be behind," he observed in a pre-action research interview. "A lot of people need tutors, so that'd be kind of a setback, because you don't have the money to pay for a tutor." Jess similarly noted that she had been on multiple trips with Hamilton theater productions, and lower SES students may have been excluded from such trips. "I sign up for those shows and don't think twice about it… but what if you can't pay?" she observed. All five higher SES students identified such material or opportunity gaps as the main source of class-based exclusion prior to the action research.

However, the higher SES students tended to indicate that social forms of exclusion based on SES were not a problem at Hamilton, a view that changed over the course of the action research. Before the action research process, Sophia said, "Socioeconomic status isn't something very important to me. It's not like what I look for in a friend or something." Elias made a similar observation: "There's not much [exclusion] in social life, there's not much differentiation between economic statuses. I don't determine my friends by that. For me, I don't think it's a very big presence within the school." Some of the higher SES students recognized prior to the action research that people at Hamilton tended to assume wealth as the norm, but they did not directly connect such assumptions to microaggressions or exclusion of lower SES students.

Over the course of the action research process, higher SES student participants began to notice the broader and deeper extent to which SES affects the Hamilton experience. In post

interviews, higher SES students discussed the problem of class-based exclusion as being "more broad," "more prevalent," and "bigger" than they previously realized. Survey responses confirm such a shift for higher SES students, with all five increasing their level of agreement with the statement: "Socioeconomic status or background significantly influences students' experience at Hamilton" (3 point average increase on a 10-point scale). Journal data indicate that this change happened in two waves: higher SES students reacted strongly to early meetings when we discussed pilot study statistics and background information about SES and sense of belonging. "The problem is much bigger than I anticipated," Sara wrote in her first journal entry. Jess echoed in her first journal: "There's more of a problem than I thought there was."

Then, as the team began collecting data through the embedded observation log, higher SES students' journals reflected another increase in their sensitivity to the problem. After the fifth meeting, Sara wrote, "Since we have started our research, I've begun to tune in much more to the different ways that SES is present around campus." Elias noted in his journal that "there is a stigma that directly talking about SES is taboo, yet people talk about it indirectly all the time in their discussions of clothing, cars, phones, etc." Meeting observation data further support the shift; in our seventh meeting, for example, Amani said she now had an "antenna up at all times," which led her to see and hear SES throughout the school culture, where she had not previously noticed it.

As discussed above, all participants developed an increased awareness of SES microaggressions. "I think I have just noticed it more," Amani told me in her post interview. Jess similarly said, "I think I've become more aware." Survey responses from higher SES students reflected their increased awareness, with higher SES students' level of agreement with the statement "I regularly notice practices, behaviors, or comments at school that intentionally or

unintentionally exclude lower-income or non-wealthy students in some way" increasing by an average of 4 points on a ten-point scale.

Higher SES students experienced a unique shift in this area as many saw themselves in the comments tracked by the group's embedded observation log. In her post interview, Jess said, "I actually saw something in the embedded observation log and I thought I may have said it. I was like, 'Oh my god, was that me?'" Sara similarly commented in her post interview on having told other students that she spent $100 on an SAT tutor, which had come up in the embedded observation log. "I've heard all those things several times, and I've probably said them, too," Jess explained. She described lower SES participants sharing their experiences hearing such comments, which struck her. "When I heard that, and I saw other people who I know it has affected, that made me think a lot."

Theme Two: Closing the Experience Gap

Beyond making the invisible visible, the group's discoveries, recommendations, and shifts in thinking centered around a second theme: closing the gap between the disparate student experiences of higher and lower SES, particularly in terms of extracurricular or "add on" activities that cost money beyond tuition, such as international trips. This section first describes what the team's research identified as the main causes of class-based exclusion in terms of the "experience gap," specifically the barriers preventing lower SES students from seeking or receiving additional financial support to fund add-on experiences. I then describe the group's proposals for closing the gap. Finally, I explore the shifts in participants' thinking about class-based exclusion in this area, which largely entailed a greater confidence and clarity about potential solutions as well as an increased emphasis on the school's responsibility to shrink the gap, rather than assuming such a wide gap is inevitable.

Finding #4 (RQ1 - cause): An "experience gap" exists between higher and lower SES students; add-on costs and barriers to additional financial aid contribute to the gap.

From early brainstorming discussions, the action research team anticipated that lower SES students at Hamilton feel excluded from extracurricular activities and other experiences that cost money beyond tuition. The team's research supported this initial assumption, but the research provided unexpected insight into causes for such a gap. Simply put, it is not surprising that wealthier Hamilton students do more and get more than their lower SES peers. Tutors, international trips, sports gear, prom limos, cars as birthday gifts, summer internships, and ski vacations are benefits of growing up affluent. However, the team's research indicated that while some of the experience gap stems from simple economic inequality, the gap is likely larger than it needs to be, considering the additional financial assistance that Hamilton could provide beyond tuition. Moving past the basic realities of income differences, the group identified school-level barriers that kept lower SES students from seeking additional aid and thus accessing a fuller Hamilton experience. They also uncovered faculty and administrator ignorance or unawareness surrounding financial aid and activity costs, which contribute to the experience gap.

The team's focus group data was key in identifying the school-level sources of the experience gap. Lower SES focus group subjects described having to go to the financial aid office to ask for help with prom tickets or other costly social events. They described being unable to go on class trips to Disneyland because they did not want to ask for money. Others talked about working after school or during the summer to pay for school lunches or SAT prep classes. Some lower SES students reported feeling uncomfortable talking to teachers when they could not afford something, and several said they had just one adult with whom they shared financial struggles, but often the adult was not a member of the financial aid office.

Adult focus group data highlighted the experience gap, too. In a focus group with staff and program leaders, subjects described school practices that expected students to pay additional costs, such as students taking turns bringing snacks to weekly advisor meetings. The teacher focus group discussed costs of athletic team apparel, tutors, and spring break trips, noting that lower SES students likely could not afford such add-on items and experiences. Several adults also pointed out that program leaders and even individual teachers plan activities with relatively minor costs, not recognizing the cumulative cost when the activities add up.

Though not the focus of the embedded observation log, the experience gap emerged from that data as well. One observed conversation involved students arranging a "class-wide" trip to a local amusement park at Halloween, a trip that several lower SES students were unable to afford. Similarly, observed data included references to a ski trip that was a mid-winter tradition for many Hamilton students, but which excluded any students who could not afford to go.

The underlying source of much of the experience gap is simple economic inequality, but the action research team identified that many lower SES students feel uncomfortable asking for more aid or are unsure about how to ask for aid beyond tuition. The research also suggested that faculty and staff were not sufficiently aware of the effect of seemingly small "add on" costs, such as sports team sweatshirts. Adults at Hamilton were also unaware of how financial aid worked, for example whether aid was offered for certain activities, and largely unaware of which students receive financial aid; therefore they were unable to help lower SES students access additional aid. When an action researcher asked staff focus group subjects if they noticed or helped when students needed more financial assistance, such as for prom tickets, a subject responded, "No. Because I don't know who's on financial aid."

The faculty focus group struggled to describe the range and type of SES diversity at Hamilton; some described a steady inclining slope, with few lower SES students and more higher SES students, and others described a barbell, with many lower SES students and many higher SES students, but few in the middle. Ultimately, faculty and staff seemed unsure about the socioeconomic landscape at the school. Adult subjects largely reported that they felt unaware of financial aid needs and practices at the school, and the SES of their own students and advisees, all of which kept them from assisting lower SES students who may need to seek aid to access more of the "Hamilton experience."

The group's research in this area uncovered an unexpected excluded sub-group at Hamilton: students whose families paid full tuition but could not afford the extras. One staff member in a focus group, for example, asked rhetorically, "What about those middle-range kids who can afford tuition but not much else? They get left out." While lower SES students who receive financial aid are made at least somewhat aware of available financial assistance beyond tuition, families who pay the full tuition (but just barely) may not get access to financial help for costs beyond tuition. As I discuss below, many participants developed a more nuanced, complex perception of which groups and individuals may feel excluded from the full Hamilton experience. Research related to the experience gap highlighted the importance of seeing SES as a range with subtle gradations, not simply a binary of "rich" and "poor."

Finding #5 (RQ1 - recommendation): Changes to financial aid knowledge and practices would help to shrink the experience gap between higher and lower SES students.

Because the group zeroed in on school-level sources of the experience gap, we were able to move beyond what could feel like an inevitable state of inequality stemming from larger economic realities. The Hamilton action research team could not overthrow capitalism or change

the U.S. tax code. And participants also agreed early in the recommendation stages that the school's goal should not be a totally equal experience for all students. At a socioeconomically diverse school, there is bound to be a range of experiences. Our goal for recommendations in this area was to shrink the gap and consider ways to provide a common "baseline" Hamilton experience that would foster inclusion. As we looked at the experience gap, we also kept in mind our first set of findings and recommendations related to making SES more visible and increasingly recognized in a more sensitive way in the culture; a related goal was to simply open the dialogue and increase awareness about how SES produced disparate Hamilton experiences, even if we could not fully close the gap.

The first two recommendations to help shrink the experience gap involved easing the financial aid processes and educating faculty about financial aid. Because our research indicated that some lower SES students felt unsure or uncomfortable about how to ask for additional aid, the team recommended that the financial aid office develop an online form for aid requests. A standard form could be included or linked in any trip applications or order forms for items such as athletic gear. Students (or parents) who feel comfortable with financial aid office personnel could continue with face-to-face requests, but those who are uncomfortable would have an alternative. Similarly, the group recommended that the financial aid office, Alicia (the Director of Financial Aid) in particular, become more visible in the community by making assembly announcements and participating in new student orientations.

The team also proposed a faculty information session about financial aid. Specifically, the group recommended having Alicia present to the faculty at the start of each school year to share information about the number or percent of students on financial aid that year, explain the

process for requesting aid, and remind teachers to be mindful about planning activities that cost additional money.

The final recommendation in this area was to establish peer mentors for incoming students who receive financial aid. Student participants who initiated the idea of a lower SES affinity group suggested mentorship as an off-shoot of such a group. Paul, in particular, was eager to play a leadership role in both the affinity group and the mentoring. Paul explained in his post interview, "When you get to be a junior or senior, you kind of know the ropes, so to speak. If you're on financial aid, you know who you can talk to," but younger students could feel lost. With a mixed-grade affinity group, lower SES students in younger grades could find guidance from older students. "I would have liked that," Paul explained in his post interview, "where I knew 'Hey, this guy who's a senior is on financial aid. This is who you talk to. This is how he deals with it. He can connect with me on that level.'" A mentor system built into an affinity group would not only create connections and belonging; it could also help to address the more tangible problem of lower SES students not asking for additional aid for activities or needs beyond tuition, which exacerbates the experience gap.

Finding #6 (RQ2 - changes in participants' views): Participants saw SES as having a greater impact on students' experiences and increasingly understood ways the schools could address the gap.

As participants learned more about the experience gap through the research, their thinking changed; while they continued to identify the disparate Hamilton experiences as a source of exclusion, most participants developed a clearer sense of how the school might shrink the gap. Prior to the action research, participants pointed to the experience gap as a source of exclusion but either did not know how to address it or placed the burden on lower SES students

to work harder to overcome their disadvantages. After the action research, participants focused on the school's responsibility to ease the process of seeking additional financial support, establish mentors to help lower SES students navigate financial aid, and increase faculty awareness of the add-on costs that create disparate experiences.

All participants described some form of the experience gap in pre interviews. In her pre interview, Shonda summed up the problem of class-based exclusion by saying, "The most obvious issue would probably be bottom line economics. Money. [Lower SES students] can't afford things. Resources." Describing the affluent student experience in her pre interview, Alicia said, "They get to do whatever they want, over and over… they're given more. Everything, more." Students similarly discussed in their pre interviews the theater trips, tutors, vacations, global exchanges, sports equipment, technology, and time due to different commute lengths that separated the affluent Hamilton experience from that of lower SES students.

However, participants were largely unable to identify potential solutions prior to the action research. Participants saw the gap between lower SES and higher SES Hamilton experiences as unfortunate but largely insurmountable. Alicia, as the Director of Financial Aid, was the only participant to highlight the school's responsibility to cut or cover activity costs that are not included in tuition. She also suggested finding ways to make aid requests easier and more comfortable for lower SES students, though she was unsure how to do it. Elias and Jess both similarly hinted at the problem of financial aid covering only tuition in their pre interviews. Jess observed, "It's kind of like financial aid gets you to go to the school, but then after that you're on your own." Most participants struggled, though, to identify ways to address the experience gap prior to the action research.

One participant placed the burden on lower SES students to manage their lack of access to the resources and experiences of their affluent peers. Explaining the problem of class-based exclusion in his pre interview, Jack, the classroom teacher, said, "I would boil it down to access to resources." He went on to describe the global trips, tutors, computer access, and free time that other participants discussed. But he then focused on lower SES students' need to be efficient with the resources they have:

> The person at the bottom of the ladder can be as successful as the one at the top, but they're just going to have to be at the razor-thin edge of efficiency to get the most out of everything they have… I'm not sure the students at the lower end really understand the concept of efficiency of allocation in their resources. What you can really get, in that sense is, educating them that although I can't give you more resources, I can show you ways and opportunities to get more out of the resources you have. Strategize with them to build that into their routine.

Before participating in the action research, Jack saw the experience gap as a natural and unavoidable byproduct of economic inequality, and his emphasis was on teaching lower SES students to make better use of what they did have rather than shrinking the gap itself. While other participants did not emphasize lower SES students' inefficiency or deficits, most could not point to specific and viable ways to address the experience gap.

After engaging in the action research, participants better understood the ways and the extent to which SES affects a student's experience at Hamilton. Adult participants and higher SES students experienced a greater shift than lower SES students, likely because lower SES students already saw firsthand the ways SES limits their Hamilton experience. Starting as early as our third meeting, before collecting any of their own data, several participants commented in

journal entries that they were struck by how much of an impact SES could have on students' experience. Amani wrote in her third entry, after just brainstorming with the research group the ways SES appears at Hamilton, "What stuck out to me… was that almost all factors of low SES somehow affect a student's life… whereas one student can afford tutors, SAT prep, another is put at a disadvantage."

Survey data similarly indicated that participants saw SES as having a greater impact on students' experiences after the research process. Prior to the action research, participants' average response to the statement "Socioeconomic status or background significantly influences students' experience at Hamilton" was 7, with 10 being strongly agree and 1 being strongly disagree. After the action research the average level of agreement was 9.

Beyond seeing SES as having a greater impact on students' experiences, participants increasingly focused on the school's responsibility in addressing the experience gap. After the action research, participants agreed less strongly with the statement "Hamilton adequately supports students who receive financial aid by providing help and support beyond tuition assistance." Prior to the action research, the average response was a 7, which dropped to a 6 after the research. Interviews further indicated that while participants largely believed the school offered significant financial support for activities, they identified barriers to students asking for such aid.

Erin described how the school could address the experience gap in her post interview, pointing to "making the students who are on financial aid have a much easier way to actually access or ask for that aid." She explained, "Right now, it's like this ambiguous path. If they know Alicia, maybe they feel comfortable, but if they don't, they don't." She also highlighted the accumulation of add-on costs and the need to bring awareness to such costs: "Helping faculty

be more aware of how much those little items… start to add up to really big things… a $10 shirt, or a $20 this. We need to stop 'Here's another fee, here's another fee.'"

Jack, shifting away from his emphasis on lower SES students' inefficiency with resources, similarly placed the burden on the school to shrink the experience gap. In his post interview he emphasized that the Hamilton experience could never be fully equal for all students, but he showed an increased awareness of why disparate experiences are problematic. "It doesn't have to be the exact same, similar does not mean same," he said about the student experience. "We are not communists here where everyone has got to have the same experience. But there are parts of the Hamilton experience that, when you add them up and take them away, the community is having a variation of experiences that I think divides the community." Jack came to view the experience gap as a problem that creates a fractured community rather than one that operates just on an individual level.

Jack also highlighted the responsibility of the school in addressing the gap, specifically identifying his own role as a global trip leader. "This is something I need to be more conscious of in how I address SES in my global trips, in the application process, and what I can do to try to expand the inclusion of more students in the community" he said in his post interview. He went on:

> When I've talked about these trips and I introduce them, I think I casually say, like, 'Oh, financial aid is available.' That's the extent. So how many kids out there would be like, 'Oh my god, I would love to go to Turkey or Greece, I would love to go to China…' But that sentence isn't enough to make them feel like it can be possible. I don't provide them with information, like 'Whatever your financial aid is…' I didn't know that information… and maybe a piece of that information would have gotten a few kids off

> the fence to be like 'Ok, let me bring this to my parents and see if we can do this.' That lack of awareness and information for someone like me that's running these things was pretty eye opening… Without this group I would still be going off into the next year with the same thing I've done in the previous six years.

Other participants reiterated Jack's recognition that the school should be responsible for easing the path to financial aid for add-on experiences. Paul described in his post interview a more open, comfortable process for requesting aid, noting that the school needed to shift from announcing aid availability "in small, size six font in the bottom of emails." Instead, he said, there should be open, frequent, and extensive discussions of how to access aid for trips and activities. Jess explained in her post interview that she wanted the school to assume add-on costs would be a struggle, rather than assuming all students could pay. "It's like, 'Prom tickets are $90, buy them,' that's obviously directed toward kids who aren't on financial aid," she explained. "But if we really just put it out there, like, it's $90 but emphasize that if you need help, we can provide it, I think that would normalize it." Participants increasingly recognized that activity leaders at the school have a responsibility to be aware of costs and to actively emphasize and promote financial aid, rather than placing a burden on lower SES students to find it. In addition to easing the aid process, participants pointed to mentoring for lower SES students as a way to help them navigate and feel more comfortable about asking for additional financial support.

While the experience gap seemed to be a problem without a solution prior to the action research, participants ultimately developed confidence in the school's ability to address the gap. Survey data supports the shift to greater clarity around potential solutions. Before participating in the research, participants averaged a 5 in their agreement with the statement "I have a clear sense of what the school can do to become more inclusive around socioeconomic diversity." After the

research, participants agreed at an average of 8, suggesting that participants developed a better understanding of how Hamilton could address class-based exclusion.

Conclusion

The action research team at Hamilton identified causes of class-based exclusion, developed recommendations, and experienced changes in their own thinking. Two themes unified the causes, recommendations, and changes: making the invisible visible and closing the experience gap. As the group's data revealed a subtle culture of assumed wealth and SES-related microaggressions, participants themselves developed an "SES lens" through which they came to view the school culture. While lower SES students had this lens prior to the research, adult participants and higher SES students began to see such elements of the culture for the first time. The group recommended an affinity group for lower SES students to share experiences and develop connections with one another, as well as to make more visible the diverse levels of SES at the school. The group also created a short film to highlight SES-related microaggressions at the school.

As the group learned more about the ways SES affects students' levels of participation in activities at Hamilton, participants became more convinced that SES creates disparate experiences for students. Though they largely recognized some degree of an experience gap prior to the research, few had ideas about how the school could address the problem. After the action research, participants focused heavily on ways the school could ease the process for lower SES students to request additional aid. They also emphasized the importance of faculty and program leaders becoming more aware of "add on" costs associated with school activities. Ultimately, the group developed a clearer sense of how the school could address problems around class-based exclusion.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Reflecting on the study of privilege, Peggy McIntosh (2012) writes, "Traditional 'objective' research techniques will not work to excavate the workings of a phenomenon we were carefully taught not to recognize within ourselves and our cultural systems" (p. 204). My study used collaborative inquiry to understand and develop solutions to address class-based exclusion at an affluent private school; the team's recommendations can inform initiatives to foster belonging at similar school sites. This study builds on others that have explored the problem but not offered detailed solutions. But perhaps the greatest contribution of the study is the demonstrated changes in thinking of participants themselves. Such shifts point to collaborative inquiry as a way to disrupt privilege and ultimately increase belonging by changing the culture of elite schools.

This chapter first discusses implications of the team's recommendations for increasing belonging for lower SES students at affluent schools. The causes of class-based exclusion identified by the team largely align with what we already know about the lower SES student experience at elite schools. But few schools have taken meaningful steps to address the problem. The recommendations that emerged from this study can therefore inform practice. Next I discuss my study's most important finding: the shift in participants' thinking. Participants came to see through collaborative inquiry the subtle forms of class-based exclusion in the school culture. They developed an "SES lens" that most did not possess before the research process.

Collaborative inquiry itself is the key recommendation of my study. Such methods offer a way to expose and disrupt privileged norms that exclude lower SES students from elite school cultures. Few studies have explored participatory action research to develop privilege

consciousness and sensitivity to microaggressions. I conclude the chapter by discussing the study's limitations and directions for future research.

Implications of Key Findings

The Hamilton action research team's recommendations expand upon existing literature that has identified sources of class-based exclusion at affluent schools (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Research shows that lower SES students at predominantly affluent schools experience a mismatch between habitus and field (Bourdieu, 1977; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Prior studies have also detailed the more tangible forms of exclusion, such as lower participation in extracurricular activities (Brantlinger, 1993; McLoughlin, 2012). My action research team found similar sources of class-based exclusion at Hamilton. But the study's findings take a step beyond existing research by making specific recommendations for improvement. This study further demonstrates how collaborative inquiry itself can be an intervention to increase belonging for lower SES students.

School-Level Recommendations to Increase Belonging

The action research team found that wealthier students had a richer Hamilton experience compared to their lower SES peers, a finding that echoes existing research (Brantlinger, 1993; McLoughlin, 2012). Lower SES students participate less actively in extracurricular activities, trips, and social events. The team also uncovered daily microaggressions that add up to a culture of affluence. This finding echoes research showing the mismatch between lower SES students' habitus and the affluent field of elite schools (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012). Lower SES students, who arrive at elite schools with lower SES norms, tend to feel a sense of unease and a lack of fit with the elite environment (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). Some studies have suggested ways for schools to increase belonging

for lower SES students, such as providing mentor relationships between older and younger students (McLoughlin, 2012). My study builds on the few existing recommendations and places greater responsibility on the institution itself rather than on the lower SES students.

First, the team created a video to highlight and visualize the SES microaggressions that are part of the daily school culture. They also proposed and announced an affinity group for lower SES students. Both are approaches that other schools could adopt to increase belonging for lower SES students. The team also recommended easing the financial aid process to allow lower SES students to more comfortably access additional support for activities and extra costs that create an experience gap. Prior studies have highlighted the need for institutions to alter their own practices rather than placing the burden on lower SES students (Bergerson, 2007; McLoughlin, 2012), and the recommendations of the Hamilton action research team offer specific ways to do so.

The team's short video used data from the embedded observation log, which tracked ongoing daily comments related to SES. Students selected four quotes that assumed wealth or disparaged lower SES students, created voiceovers of the quotes, and played them alongside the written quotes and images of the Hamilton campus. Thus, the film highlights subtle daily comments related to SES, drawing attention to statements that otherwise go under the radar. Microaggressions by definition are difficult to expose, and dominant groups tend to have a hard time noticing microaggressions (McIntosh, 1988; Sue, 2010). Groups at other schools could replicate this single piece of the research project, even without engaging in a full collaborative research project. Such small scale projects could bring attention and awareness to the culture of affluence that is transmitted and reinforced through microaggressions.

The SES affinity group recommendation adds to the literature on affinity groups for other minority groups (Hartness, 2012). The affinity group for lower SES students builds relationships between such students. Though minority students often build connections around race or ethnicity, lower SES students at predominantly affluent schools do so less consistently, likely because SES is a largely invisible identifier (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). The affinity group also presents SES to the broader community as an identifier that is important, and it sends the message that the school is socioeconomically diverse.

Finally, the group proposed reforms to the school's financial aid program. Studies on the lower SES student experience at elite colleges have shown that students often struggle to navigate the financial aid process (McLoughlin, 2012). Tuition support provides access, but schools do not always attend closely enough to the lower SES student experience once on campus (Jack, 2015; McLoughlin, 2012). Instead, lower SES students have to learn the often complicated process of requesting additional aid for books, travel, and activities. Past studies have proposed mentor programs to help lower SES students navigate the aid system (McLoughlin, 2012). Such recommendations are useful; the Hamilton team also proposed a mentor system built into the affinity group to help younger students navigate financial aid.

However, mentoring still represents a solution that ultimately puts the burden on lower SES students to adjust to elite environments. Mentors can guide students through the system, but the system remains unchanged. Instead, the Hamilton team looked closely at the barriers within the financial aid program and proposed changes to the process itself. Specifically, the team found that lower SES students were either uncomfortable or unsure about asking for additional aid to go on trips or participate in other activities. Paul, the lower SES junior participant, noted that he

began to learn the system only after several years at Hamilton. Again, a mentor could help, but the team placed the burden on the school to change the system itself.

The team recommended that the financial aid office create an online form for financial aid requests. While some students reported that they felt comfortable going to Alicia (the director of financial aid) or other admissions staff members when they needed help paying for an activity, many did not feel comfortable asking or did not know whom to ask. A well publicized online application for additional aid would reduce the discomfort of asking in person, and it would also clarify the process for students and families. Similarly, the team recommended that Alicia and the financial aid office increase their visibility by making regular assembly announcements about financial aid for events and trips. They also suggested that messages about financial aid be more prominent and visible. In his post interview, Paul joked about the event-related emails with financial aid information at the very bottom, in size six font. Participants agreed that more direct, explicit messages about financial aid would normalize the need for aid and increase the comfort of students seeking support.

Such recommendations build on the few studies that call for institutions to change their processes rather than expecting lower SES students to navigate them (Bergerson, 2007). While existing research on the lower SES student experience has begun to place the burden on schools, few studies present specific recommendations about what exactly schools can change. The multi-pronged proposals and interventions of the Hamilton team can inform concrete changes at peer schools.

Collaborative Inquiry as an Intervention to Shift Cognitive Frames

Several of the group's recommendations offer promising strategies for increasing lower SES student belonging in affluent schools; but the most noteworthy implication of my study

relates to collaborative inquiry itself as a way to change individuals' thinking. Elite institutions can better support lower SES students, but a deficit approach focused on the marginalized group is insufficient at best and harmful at worst (Anderman, 2007; Bensimon, 2005). And focusing solely on tangible forms of exclusion misses the deeper cultural norms that make wealthy students feel at home and non-wealthy students feel like outsiders (Aries & Seider, 2007; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003).

To truly foster belonging and equity, predominantly affluent schools need to engage in critical self-examination to shift school cultures away from affluent norms that exclude lower SES students. Participants in my study experienced two different shifts in thinking. First, they came to believe that the problem could indeed be solved, and that it was the school's responsibility to change. Second, participants developed an "SES lens" that allowed them to see subtle forms of class-based exclusion that they previously had not noticed in the school culture. I discuss implications of both shifts below.

Shift One: A Sense of Empowerment & Placing the Burden on the Institution

Through the research process, participants' thinking shifted in two key ways. One shift was in their thinking about the "experience gap." As I describe in chapter four, prior to the research, participants identified that wealthier students participated in more social and extracurricular activities; but participants were unsure about how to address the problem. One participant suggested that lower SES students themselves needed to work harder to make better use of their resources. But over the course of the project, participants began to see more clearly the ways that the experience gap could shrink; further, all participants placed the burden on the school to make improvements. They came to believe that the problem could be solved, and that it was the school's responsibility to change.

The sense of empowerment and institutional responsibility around the experience gap reflects a meaningful change in participants' thinking. A small number of studies have called for schools to take on the responsibility for fostering lower SES student belonging. "Rather than thinking about improving the integration of students," writes Bergerson (2007), "institutions must take a close look at their own values and assumptions to see how current social and power structures are reproduced within their own walls" (p. 116). But studies have yet to show how to shift the thinking of faculty and school leaders to embrace this sense of responsibility.

Action research, which bridges research and practice, offers a way for community members to explore and understand problems at their own site. In my study, participants began with a pilot study diagnosis of class-based exclusion and built their own study to better understand the causes. They began the process with just a vague sense of the problem and a lack of clarity and confidence around solutions. Through collecting and understanding their own data, participants came to better understand the problem; they also developed a greater sense of empowerment, expressing increased confidence in the school's ability to improve.

My study's findings further suggest that, in the case of socioeconomic exclusion, collaborative inquiry can shift individuals' thinking toward a sense of institutional or community responsibility to foster belonging. Such a shift away from deficit thinking is crucial as schools continue to become more socioeconomically diverse. Educators and school leaders can turn to collaborative inquiry to move individuals away from blaming or burdening minority groups to conform or adapt to the school culture. Instead, through collaborative research, individuals can come to see that schools themselves need to change and adapt as different groups join their communities.

Shift Two: Becoming Aware of Subtle Forms of Exclusion

The second and most important key change in participants' thinking was their increased awareness of previously invisible SES microaggressions. Coming into the project, only lower SES student participants mentioned "little comments" that exclude non-wealthy Hamilton students. After the research, though, every participant emphasized such cultural norms and assumptions as a major source of class-based exclusion. Such a shift is critical and noteworthy, as it demonstrates that participating in the research led higher SES participants to see how privilege is reinforced in the culture of the school.

As the Hamilton action research team designed their own study, collected data, and engaged in analysis, they began to question their own assumptions and ultimately opened their eyes to a form of exclusion that many had not previously seen. The higher SES participants in particular referred frequently in post interviews and journals to having an "eye opening" experience as they began to see the more subtle, cultural expressions of class-based exclusion at Hamilton. Participants frequently referenced the embedded observation log in their post interviews; the log forced them to actively tune in to and look for comments or moments that related to SES in the daily school environment. Participants described developing a lens or an antenna as they increasingly noticed SES microaggressions.

Existing research has highlighted the mismatch between the habitus of non-affluent students and the field of elite schools (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2009a; Khan, 2012; Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003). We know that affluent norms—everything from certain brands of clothing to assumptions about parents' education levels—dominate and define the culture of elite schools. As I discussed in chapter two, the mismatch between a lower SES habitus and an affluent school culture poses the greatest challenge to belonging. Schools can develop initiatives to close the

experience gap or create connections among lower SES students, but deep cultural change is difficult.

My study builds on existing research by engaging community members in critically examining norms and discourse that largely go unseen. Previous studies have shown the way an affluent school culture rejects a lower SES habitus, but few have attempted to take the next step toward cultural change. Some studies have successfully shown how collaborative inquiry can shift cognitive frames in the area of racial achievement gaps and masculine hegemony (Bensimon, 2005; Stoudt, 2007); my study offers new insight into how such inquiry methods play out with SES at an elite school, directly engaging with notions of habitus and field.

Although my study's action research approach involved a small number of participants, deep cultural change likely must begin on the individual level. "The problem of unequal outcomes resides within individuals," observes Bensimon (2005), "in the cognitive frames that govern their attitudes, beliefs, values, and actions. Similarly, reduction of inequalities also lies within individuals, specifically, in their capacity to develop equity as their cognitive frame" (p. 100). In her study of institutional leaders who examined data on racial inequality at their own school, Bensimon (2005) observed the power of inquiry to shift individuals' cognitive frames. Her study, like mine, demonstrates that individuals' understanding of inequality or exclusion at the school shifts upon examining evidence for themselves.

Similar participatory action research studies, such as Stoudt's (2007) study of masculine hegemony and bullying at Rockport, an elite boys' school, found that the research process opened participants' eyes to subtle exclusionary practices in a school's culture. My study adds to such literature by demonstrating how such methods can be used to zero in on class privilege and socioeconomic exclusion, an area that remains largely untouched by elite schools. The taboo

nature of class and SES, particularly at predominantly affluent institutions, creates a barrier to examining the problem of class-based exclusion. But my study indicates that both adults and students in such communities can enthusiastically and successfully engage in such research, and that privileged individuals in particular can shift their cognitive frames to more fully see the previously hidden forces that create a culture of class-based exclusion.

Larger Questions of Privilege and Inequality

At the core of my study are difficult questions about the unequal educational system in the U.S. and broader economic inequality. Students at Hamilton, particularly those from wealthy families, have tremendous opportunities and advantages. Even the lower SES students who attend Hamilton and similar schools are extraordinarily advantaged when compared with peers who attend underfunded neighborhood schools. They may experience exclusion and obstacles throughout their experience at elite institutions, and the cleft habitus may leave psychological scars; but lower SES students who find the path to private schools are undoubtedly advantaged as a result of the educational opportunity and resources. For many, such a path represents a degree of social mobility that is rare in the U.S. today.

The unanswered question left by my study is how to get those at the top of the ladder to critically examine the very system that benefits them. In her study of privileged students' orientations toward social justice, Swalwell (2013) found that most wealthy students at an elite independent school felt a sense of obligation to promote equality; but few truly demonstrated a social justice orientation, one that involved questioning and disrupting their own privileged status. Indeed, Swalwell highlights the "tension between social justice pedagogy and elite education" (p. 8), noting that a true social justice orientation would lead members of elite schools to question the very existence of their own institutions.

The faculty members on the Hamilton action research team wrestled with this tension. Erin, Alicia, Jack, and Shonda all grappled with larger issues of social justice, economic inequality, and privilege guilt by the end of the study. All four adult participants observed in their post interviews that higher SES students should have to deal with guilt around their life circumstances. Erin, for example, noted that wealthy Hamilton students won the lottery, in a sense, by being born into privilege. They should have some discomfort, she argued, because such inequality is fundamentally unfair. And Jack observed that the school itself perpetuates larger systemic inequalities by further privileging the already privileged.

However, such privilege guilt came to be seen by the action research team as a potential barrier to meaningful action. Wealthy students can easily retreat into finding ways to justify economic inequality, thereby easing their guilt and absolving themselves of any responsibility to act (Seider, 2011; Swalwell, 2013). When guilt leads to system justification, privileged individuals move further away from being part of the solution. This may be why economic justice curricula and community service interventions largely fall short of fostering privilege consciousness and creating lasting change in individuals' thinking (Mistry et al., 2011; Seider, 2011; Swalwell, 2013).

Instead, engaging community members in studying their own institutions may offer ways around privilege guilt paralysis. Higher SES student participants on the Hamilton team frequently noted the powerful impact of hearing about their lower SES peers' experience. Jess, for example, the higher SES junior, lingered after one AR meeting to talk to Paul, the lower SES junior, about his experience with financial aid. She observed in her post interview that she had never thought about the stress a student might feel as he wonders if his family will be able to

make the next tuition payment. She imagined aloud how she might feel if she were suddenly unsure whether she could return to Hamilton next year.

In a larger sense, both Jess and Paul are privileged by virtue of attending Hamilton, and Paul's struggle with financial aid is far from the most devastating lower SES experience nationwide or worldwide. But Jess and Paul are connected through their membership in the Hamilton community, which forced Jess to grapple with Paul's socioeconomic challenges without being able to distance herself from him. When wealthy students participate in community service or learn about economic inequalities in the larger system, it is easier for them to push back, justify, or emotionally distance themselves from such inequalities (Seider, 2011). Engaging students in studying their own school culture and the economic inequalities within it, though, may offer a way for affluent students to meaningfully question their privilege.

My study raises more questions than it answers. But it ultimately answers and reinforces the call for non-traditional research methods to uncover, examine, and potentially disrupt privilege. Collaborative inquiry aimed at examining one's own institution offers a promising method for shifting an individual's cognitive frame, which can slowly lead toward lasting institutional, cultural change.

Limitations

Participatory action research is limited by its localized scope, time intensiveness, and messiness. While the discoveries, recommendations, and changes in thinking of the Hamilton action research team could reasonably inform improvements at peer institutions, the action research was specific to Hamilton's culture. Other schools could use the general approach and methods of the group. But every institution has distinct cultural norms and forms of socioeconomic exclusion, so specific findings of our action research team may not be directly

relevant for other schools. Further, to the extent that action research participants were subjects of my study, the sample size was small. A similar study with a larger sample may not result in the same shifts in participants' cognitive frames seen in my study.

Collaborative inquiry as an intervention also has the limitation of requiring significant resources, primarily time. The twelve participants in my study devoted ten hours of meeting time and additional time for data collection outside of our meetings. Participants needed to be emotionally and intellectually invested for the action research experience to have an impact; and since most of my participants volunteered, these individuals may have been unusually primed to learn and change. Trying to shift individuals' cognitive frames through action research may fall short if participants are required to participate, and the intervention is likely difficult to replicate on a large-scale or school-wide level.

Recommendations for Future Research

Predominantly affluent schools, both public and private, K-12 and higher education, are continuing to increase access for non-wealthy students. As they do, educators and scholars will need to rethink the fundamental purpose and identities of such schools. Future studies can continue to dig into the experience of lower SES students at elite schools, though much is already known. However, SES is a multi-faceted identifier, and studies of the lower SES student experience at affluent schools, including mine, tend to group all lower-income students together. Future research can more carefully differentiate between elements that comprise SES and how such elements affect the student experience differently. For example, many independent schools provide financial aid for children of faculty, but such students likely experience only parts of the exclusion felt by lower SES students coming from low-income neighborhoods and less educated

families. It will be important to offer more nuanced understandings of the diverse lower SES student experience as research on affluent schools continues.

My study paves the way for continued research into how collaborative inquiry can change the way individuals think about and see exclusion. Additional research is needed to determine whether the shifts seen in my study persist over time. Do participants retain the "SES lens" they developed as a result of doing the action research? And perhaps even more important, do they speak up or intervene in exclusionary moments they continue to observe? Future studies should explore how individuals can not only change their thinking through inquiry, but how they can learn to take meaningful action in the face of microaggressions and subtle forms of exclusion. There also exist opportunities to determine whether the collaborative inquiry approach can work on a larger scale, possibly as part of a class or school-wide initiative.

Conclusion

Echoing McIntosh's (2012) call for non-traditional methods to unearth and examine privilege, Bensimon (2005) observes, "Organization learning, in both theory and practice, is particularly effective in making the invisible visible and the undiscussable discussable" (p. 99). The inquiry process has the power to shift individuals' cognitive frames toward equity and inclusion, a cognitive shift "that leads to change from within the self outward to the institution" (p. 110). The Hamilton action research study sheds light on the lower SES experience at elite institutions, and it also contributes to the expanding literature on inquiry as intervention.

Privilege of all kinds tends to remain invisible in the absence of intentional efforts to examine it. The cultures of predominantly affluent schools, particularly elite private institutions with long histories, are unlikely to change without the willingness of privileged individuals to critically examine their own privilege. Inquiry teams have the power to "hold a mirror up to their

own institution" (Bensimon, 2005, p. 105), ultimately using research to shift individuals' cognitive frames and foster greater inclusion for lower SES students.

POST SCRIPT

Reflection and Implications for Leadership

When I began developing my dissertation topic, my initial interests were in the area of character development, civics education, and social-emotional learning. Though I teach history, my primary mission as an educator is the development of morally engaged, ethical young people. I have always been fascinated and troubled by the socioeconomic landscape of independent schools, but I did not plan to study it. The topic seemed too big and too politically risky. But as the project evolved, I came to see how socioeconomic inclusion and privilege consciousness fit squarely in the realm of my initial interests. Socioeconomic inclusion and privilege consciousness are part of the development of morally engaged, empathetic, civic-minded young people, particularly at affluent private schools.

I hope teachers and leaders at such independent schools increasingly feel a sense of responsibility to engage students in hard questions about privilege and inequality, in both larger society and their own school communities. Such conversations may lead us to question the existence of our own institutions. But I would argue that fostering privilege consciousness and questioning socioeconomic inequalities need not lead to the dismantling of independent schools in general. Larger questions of economic injustice remain important, but developing privilege consciousness in affluent students is also simply about character and good citizenship. It is about putting oneself in someone else's shoes, not making assumptions about the experiences of others, and being grateful for one's own unearned advantages and good fortune.

Independent school leaders have an important role in clearing and widening the pathways into such schools, particularly for non-wealthy students. Expanding financial aid, changing recruiting strategies, and keeping add-on costs down are all important to the continued

diversification of such schools. But school leaders could also initiate an action research-style process, such as the one at Hamilton, to begin examining issues of socioeconomic exclusion in their school cultures. School leaders can begin to engage their communities in the important and difficult discussions of inclusion, haves and have-nots, and privilege. We can begin to shift the reality of who belongs in elite private schools, who owns and fits such schools.

Students may begin to question larger systemic inequalities and privileging systems, and I hope this would lead to action – perhaps in the form of career choices, voting, community organizing, etc. But ultimately, in my mind, the core purpose of fostering inclusion and consciousness around socioeconomic diversity should be the development of good citizens and good people. Particularly in predominantly affluent school communities, explorations of privilege and inequalities will help students be increasingly sensitive and inclusive toward classmates and, in the long term, fellow citizens. As the Hamilton team's video states at the very end, "We all belong."

APPENDICES

Data Collection Instruments

Interview Protocols

Pre-AR interview protocol.

1. We're going to be talking about socioeconomic status and socioeconomic diversity, which can be a difficult topic to discuss. How comfortable would you say you feel talking about issues related to socioeconomic status and diversity?

2. Talk to me about socioeconomic status or social class at Hamilton.
    a. Probe: What are the major issues or problems when it comes to socioeconomic status or SES diversity at Hamilton? What do you see as the problems we as a community should address?
    b. Probe: What do you see as the benefits of socioeconomic diversity?
    c. Probe: Can you give me specific examples?

3. How would you describe your own socioeconomic status?
    a. Probe: What, specifically, makes you think this is your SES?
    b. For students: How do you think other people at Hamilton would describe your socioeconomic status?

4. How does your own socioeconomic status affect your experience at Hamilton?
    a. Probe: Can you give me specific examples?

5. How do you think students' socioeconomic status affects their experience at Hamilton?
    a. What do you think it's like for wealthy students to go to school here?
        i. Probe: What makes you think that? Be specific.
    b. What do you think it's like for lower-income or non-wealthy students?
        i. Probe: What makes you think that? Be specific.

6. What, if anything, do you think could be better with regards to socioeconomic diversity issues at Hamilton? What are the problems you think need to be addressed?
    a. Probe: What do you think the school should be doing differently, if anything?

7. What, if anything, can you personally do to address these concerns or contribute to these improvements?

Post-AR interview protocol.

1. We're going to be talking about socioeconomic status and socioeconomic diversity, which can be a difficult topic to discuss. How comfortable would you say you feel talking about issues related to socioeconomic status and diversity?

2. Talk to me about socioeconomic status or social class at Hamilton.
    a. Probe: Can you give me specific examples?
    b. Probe: What are the major issues or problems when it comes to socioeconomic status or SES diversity at Hamilton? What do you see as the problems we as a community should address?

3. How do you think students' socioeconomic status affects their experience at Hamilton?
    a. What do you think it's like for wealthy students to go to school here?
        i. Probe: What makes you think that? Be specific.
    b. What do you think it's like for lower-income or non-wealthy students?
        i. Probe: What makes you think that? Be specific.

4. What, if anything, do you think could be better with regards to socioeconomic diversity issues at Hamilton? What are the problems you think need to be addressed?
    a. Probe: What do you think the school should be doing differently, if anything?

5. What, if anything, can you personally do to address these concerns or contribute to these improvements?

6. Describe your experience participating in the action research project.
    a. Probe: What are your take-aways? What did you learn?
    b. Probe: Was there anything that was difficult for you? Which elements of the process had a particular impact on you?
    c. How, if at all, would you say the process changed your thinking?

Pre/Post Questionnaire

1. How comfortable are you discussing issues related to socioeconomic status or social class?

    1=very uncomfortable; 10=very comfortable

2. How knowledgeable are you about issues related to socioeconomic status or social class?

    1=not at all; 10=very knowledgeable

3. How would you describe your own social class or socioeconomic status?

    Upper class
    Upper-middle class
    Middle class

Lower-middle class
Working class
Poor
Not sure
Other:

The next section asks about the current climate or culture at Hamilton. Respond based on your own opinion or perspective.

1=strongly disagree; 10=strongly agree

1. Students have an equal opportunity to succeed at Hamilton, regardless of socioeconomic status.

2. Hamilton adequately supports students who receive financial aid by providing help and support beyond tuition assistance.

3. Wealthy students at Hamilton are aware of their class privilege, meaning the advantages they have due to their economic abilities or class background.

4. I regularly notice practices, behaviors, or comments at school that intentionally or unintentionally exclude lower-income or non-wealthy students in some way.

5. Hamilton is a comfortable environment for students of all socioeconomic backgrounds.

6. There's a lot that I can do on my own to contribute positively to the socioeconomic climate at Hamilton.

7. Wealthy students have it easier at Hamilton compared to lower-income students.

8. For students of lower socioeconomic status to feel included at Hamilton, the school's culture needs to change.

9. I speak up or intervene when I hear an insensitive comment related to socioeconomic class.

10. Hamilton should do more to help lower socioeconomic status students adapt to the school's culture.

11. Exclusion related to socioeconomic class is a major problem at Hamilton.

12. Socioeconomic class/status is an important element of my identity.

13. Socioeconomic status or background significantly influences students' experience at Hamilton.

14. I have a clear sense of what the school can do to become more inclusive around socioeconomic diversity.

Participant Journal Prompts

The Google form journals, which I sent individually to each participant at the conclusion of each meeting, included the following prompts, each with a separate text box:

1. What did you learn today about the issue of class-based exclusion at Hamilton, or about socioeconomic diversity in general?

2. How did the group discussion or collaborative process contribute to what you learned?

Meeting Observation Template

I used a template drawing on the following elements to record observation notes from each meeting. The template was divided between descriptive and reflective elements (Merriam, 2009).

1. Meeting date, time, location, and attendees

2. Description: Who sits where; opening discussion/activity; questions raised or ideas/experiences shared; major points of discussion, phases of the meeting; decisions made about the group's own research questions, inquiry methods, analysis/interpretation, findings, or recommendations

3. Reflection: Tone of comments or general tone and mood of the group; interpretive frame invoked by participants in describing the problem; roadblocks encountered or overcome; apparent disagreements regarding findings or recommendations; level of complexity or simplification in discussing major concepts (e.g. privilege); apparent feelings of guilt, blame, frustration, discomfort, etc.

Hamilton Team's Research Design

Research Questions

1. What are the most significant expressions, experiences, and sources of class-based exclusion at Hamilton?
    a. How does SES affect all students' experience at Hamilton?
    b. What is the "social geography" of class/SES at Hamilton?

To what extent are faculty and higher SES students aware of how SES affects all students' experiences at Hamilton? What is the level of class consciousness or "SES awareness," and how can we increase it?

What are the barriers to discussing SES openly at Hamilton, and how can we encourage

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2">more open discussion of SES?</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Subjects
• Upper school students of all SES backgrounds
• Faculty & staff (adults who work with students)</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Types of Data
• Stories and experiences: Rich qualitative data to paint a picture of the “fit gap” and how SES affects the student experience, descriptions of how the culture may inadvertently exclude lower SES students; perspectives of higher SES students and faculty on how/whether SES plays a role at Hamilton.
Observations of daily events, comments, etc. to capture the “daily life” and social geography of SES at Hamilton.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Data Collection Tools
1. Focus groups: Student groups facilitated by students - both homogenous and mixed SES groups; subjects recruited/identified by AR students (& have subjects self-ID SES); Fac/Staff groups facilitated by AR adults
2. Embedded observation: Take note of & log overheard comments or events/issues related to SES in the classroom, faculty meetings, conversations with friends, on social media, etc. as we go about our daily lives at Hamilton.</td><td>Data Analysis
Coding/themes: Focus group facilitators keep detailed notes and bring to the group (identify participants by initials, or numbers -- keep anonymous); group reads through “transcripts” for themes (e.g. SES impact on academic outcomes; mismatch of habitus and school culture; lack of open discussion of SES, etc.)</td></tr>
</table>

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