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Gaztambine-Fernandez, Ruben A. (2009) *Best of the Best: Becoming Elite at an American Boarding School*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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Since there is a profusion of current research about students who are being left behind in the public education system, in *The Best of the Best: Becoming Elite in an American Boarding School*, Ruben A. Gaztambide-Fernandez studied the other side of the dichotomy, an elite boarding school, in order to understand the extent of the disparity between the privileged and the disadvantaged as previously explored by Coleman, Hoffer, and Kilgore (1981) and Cookson and Persell (1985). Adding to this “discourse of distinction” (p. 12), Gaztambide-Fernandez conducted an ethnographic study that focused on socio-cultural conceptualizations of identification. At the fictionally named Weston School, Gaztambide-Fernandez explored his research questions regarding how students’

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education is shaped by abundance and how students construct and internalize their identity as being a part of a privileged group while also questioning the extent to which race, class, and gender factor into this identity.

Because culture is a key focus in all ethnographic studies (Preissle & Grant, 2004), Gaztambide-Fernandez imbedded himself for three months in 2002 and nine months in 2003-2004 within the culture of meritocracy to study privileged students' discourse about status and hierarchy in their school and the world. In order to do this, Gaztambide-Fernandez balanced his role as an insider and outsider to the institution. Gaztambide-Fernandez characterized his role as a researcher and an outsider since he did not graduate from Weston and was Puerto-Rican, a minority amongst the white majority. However, he does function somewhat as an insider due to his status as a Harvard graduate student and familiarity with the Ivy League experience. In addition, he had previous experience working in elite boarding schools before attending Weston. The fact that he had the diction to discuss the inner workings of boarding schools and the education to be involved in academic discussions validated his place amongst Weston's staff, faculty and students.

With his focus on social inequalities and hierarchies, "hidden curriculum" (Jackson, 1968; McLaren, 2009; Weber, 1978), identity formation, and how power relations influence what was perceived as acceptable behavior (Burr, 2003; Foucault, 1980), Gaztambide-Fernandez's work critically questioned how identity and hierarchy was socially constructed within Weston with a constructivist epistemology that recognized that all knowledge is the result of seeing the world from various perspectives that serve particular interests over others (Burr, 2003).

Gaztambide-Fernandez emphasized the fact that neither he nor his participants were neutral because "they are always positioned culturally, historically, and theoretically" (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007, p. 27) through their experiences. Furthermore, he realized the subjectivity of his work, pointing out that he shared his experiences at Weston School from his perspective and observations and that if someone else were to have done the study, a very different interpretation may have been published.

Keeping his subjectivity in mind, Gaztambide-Fernandez conducted “purposeful sampling” to select 36 volunteer, senior students of varying ethnicity, financial situation, social space, background, experience, and interest in order to achieve “maximum variation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and capture an accurate representation of Weston’s student body. Data collection methods included “deep hanging out” (Weber, 1978), observation, a survey of the senior class, in-depth narrative interview protocols, and three different focus group activities that provided more naturalistic conversation and complex dynamics between participants (Morgan, 2002). Furthermore, when analyzing the collected data, Gaztambide-Fernandez adopted Strauss’s (1987) grounded theory that focused on strategies and conditions under which identifications were constructed. He ended up coding narratives according to topic when he realized that there were repetitive “spheres of experience”: work, social interactions, and intimacy (p. 237). In addition, he analyzed his subjective role as a researcher through a reflexive analysis of field notes, interactions, memos and journaling.

Once he recognized the “spheres of experience” in which participants were operating, Gaztambide-Fernandez focused his attention on the classroom, the lunch room, and the dormitories. Gaztambide-Fernandez commented on the seminar, round-table style of the classroom which left room for discussion that was generally initiated by students. In individual interviews, Gaztambide-Fernandez learned that students continually rate their intelligence against those of their peers, consciously creating a hierarchy in the classroom. In the lunch room, tables were clearly segregated either by interest such as sports or theatre or by dormitory. Which lunchroom one ate in also had a significant impact on how they identified themselves. Those who ate in the valley saw themselves as social, athletic and popular while those who ate in the hills were considered more serious and academic.

Furthermore, relationships formed within the dormitories significantly influenced student identity as participants identified themselves as belonging to a particular dorm, participating in the rituals of that dorm, and sitting with their dorm members at assemblies and even at lunch. These observations support Gaztambide-Fernandez’s

suggestion that the culture of these three environments has a dramatic impact on how students identify themselves and each other at Weston.

After his time at Weston School, Gaztambide-Fernandez found that students could justify themselves as deserving of the privileges they received at Weston through the 5 Es: exclusion, engagement, excellence, entitlement, and envisioning (p. 197). All students believed that they were not *excluded* because they provided “something special” to the school. At Weston, students felt that one could *engage* in activities by find his/her niche because the school could afford to host a variety of programs in order for each student to be successful. In addition, students felt that they were *entitled* to the privileged reputation they received as Weston graduates because of the school’s demand for *excellence* and their rise to the challenge through hard work, intelligence, and focus, downplaying the fact that affluency had something to do with their opportunity to attend Weston. Finally, Westonians *envisioned* themselves as entitled to participate as leaders due to their success. However, because race, class, and gender shaped the experiences of students, Gaztambide-Fernandez found that not all Westonians experienced the 5 Es similarly. For example, minorities created a “double consciousness” (DuBois, 1961) that put limits on their claims to privilege and title. Furthermore, females’ behavior was influenced by sexist stereotypes, making them choose between being perceived as smart and pushy, or pretty and date-able. Finally, those on financial aid were limited in the hobbies they could afford (Gaztambide-Fernandez mentions high-end fashion, cigar collections and high-stakes poker games) which limited their social sphere. Due to these disadvantages, Gaztambide-Fernandez concluded the book by stating that he would not send his daughter to Weston if he had the opportunity due to the actuality that, like in many social venues, minorities, women, and the financially disadvantaged are on the margins of the Weston experience.

While the study is a thorough examination of how advantaged students position themselves within elite boarding schools and how they justify their privilege, Gaztambide-Fernandez stated that one purpose for the study was to determine what elite students received so that it would be more apparent as to what disadvantaged,

under-funded, public schools were lacking. While he stated that the elite identifications of Weston students taught them to lead while other non-elite students learn to labor, Gaztambide-Fernandez fails to make any real, substantial, social comment about the disparities between the opportunities of those who have and those who have not. While it is understood that the study was focused on interpreting how elite students viewed themselves, it is hard to see the disparity between their sense of entitlement without briefly mentioning the experiences of the disadvantaged and how it affects the construction of their identity. While he stated that there has been plenty of research on this topic, it would have been appropriate to include some of that research in his analysis in order to give some perspective as to the drastic discrepancy in available opportunities.

Nevertheless, I find Gaztambide-Fernandez's study valuable in that it provided a rare look into an environment that excludes the majority of people. As an outsider to this environment, he brought a perspective that highlighted the mentality and practices of the privileged, often pointing out the folly of elitist codes, hierarchies, and perceived norms that played just as significant a role in students' identity formation as the demand for scholastic excellence.

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