

A Critical Examination of How Independent Schools Cultivate Essential Habits of Mind for
Social Impact

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American society is mostly founded on a Puritan value of hard work equals a good life. While this value is admirable, it is not the reality of most people in today's society. This habit of mind, being the only thing you need to be successful, is extremely flawed, but continuously pops up in our culture, specifically among the privileged. The different approaches to teaching habits of mind prepare students for a certain type of world they are expected to enter and therefore create different perceptions of their place in society. Highly selective and elite independent schools are often regarded for their academic rigor and emphasis on hard work. Many elite private schools have changed their student body to be more representative of the population by increasing diversity; however, they continue to exceptionalize their students because of their ability to engage in academic rigor and hard work. Oftentimes, these schools perpetuate distorted perceptions of society by teaching their students that exceptionality is the norm. Meanwhile, less selective private schools prepare their students to have an impact on the world through habits of mind that are applied in their community. As a result, these schools contribute to the development of socially responsible citizens and foster a sense of responsibility towards the welfare of society. The key, according to these schools, is not to be exceptional but to be integrated into your community. Therefore, if we want students to be prepared to enter the world with practical/pragmatic and necessary skills and abilities, we need to reflect on how independent schools teach habits of mind and the effect they can have on our society.

In practice, habits of mind are different processes and approaches to interpreting the world and problem-solving. This can include metacognition, flexible thinking, applying past knowledge to new ideas, thinking and communicating clearly, etc. These skills are critical for learning regardless of whether a student is in an elite private school or a low-ranking public

school. These skills are imperative for students to learn because they will guide them outside of their school environment. To understand how habits of mind affect a student's relation to the world, I will examine three schools: St. Paul's, an elite private school, Mastery School of Hawken, a private school in Cleveland, Ohio, and Burlington City and Lake Semester, a hybrid program in Burlington High School.

One case study of a school that overvalued exceptionalism is St Paul's. The habits of mind cultivated in St. Paul's classrooms teach their students from a young age that they are exceptional because they are engaging in tremendously challenging academic work. St. Paul's mission is "[to] engage young people in a diverse, inclusive, and ethical community, dedicated to the pursuit of excellence in character and scholarship" (About). Their courses do this by asking "big questions" and challenging their students to think differently about the world through rigorous classroom skills and cultivating habits of mind to relate to the world in a particular way. The school projects exceptionalism onto their students by expecting them to seriously analyze questions well beyond the standard academic demands of public school. In Shamus Khan's book, *Privilege: The Making of Adolescents in St. Paul's School*, he gives an example of a student describing the experience of tests in St. Paul's. The student describes the rigor at St. Paul's as "totally different...[and] anything can be on a test [like] 'what is virtue?' ... We never had to think like that before. Not in school at least" (Khan, 155). The expectations placed on these students to be able to engage in the impossible and make it possible is what perpetuates a belief that exceptionality and hard work will result in a successful life.

One effect of exceptionalism is that it can lead to an elitist mindset resulting in students feeling like they are above others. Elitism used to be associated with someone's position in

society through their family name and history (Khan, 36). Now elitism is associated with merit and personal character (Khan, 36). Khan states that his students believe that “limited (exclusive) knowledge, tastes, and dispositions mean [the disadvantaged] have not seized upon the fruits of our newly open world” (16). This reflects the long-standing Puritan values that are the foundation of American society. The students believe that all opportunities are equal for all people and that it is character that determines whether a person succeeds. These students relate to the world as someone who deserves their social position because they worked hard for it. However, this completely negates all the support and opportunities they were given. This ignores racial and socio-economic systemic privileges, and this logic develops a misconception that the difference in outcomes is a reflection of who people are rather than the conditions of their environments. Within the microcosm of the school, the students begin to formulate an identity around exceptionalism, and redefine elitism as having extraordinary ability because they understand how to seize opportunities through their habits of mind. This could potentially lead to unintentional social stratification because they choose to associate only with those they consider fellow elites. This can lead to a lack of diversity and inclusion which only continues to perpetuate the social disparities that St Paul’s is claiming to fight.

Let us look at a second case that exemplifies a private school that prepares its students for social change and engagement with the real world: The Mastery School of Hawken in Cleveland, Ohio. Schools like this teach habits of mind not only through academic rigor but also apply that rigor to community involvement. The Mastery School’s mission is for their students to “develop deep and enduring skills needed for success in today’s world: critical thinking, creative problem solving, collaboration, communication,” etc (Our Approach to Education). These skills sound similar to the habits of mind that St. Paul’s School emphasizes in its rigorous courses, yet

Mastery School's curriculum emphasizes the application of habits of mind to help the community (What's A Macro?). Mastery School partners with local businesses, artists, and professionals to mentor and guide their students who are expected to use their skills to support members of the world, not just members of *their* world. The students are expected to demonstrate their mastery of skills, knowledge, and ability via presentations and community and individual projects that solve real, complex problems for real people.

To illustrate habits of mind that are applied to the community, let's take a look at one of the programs that Mastery School students participate in every semester: the Macro. In the Macro, students choose a community partner to work with to solve a problem. One project they can complete is, "work[ing] on challenges like understanding the historical context of a neighborhood to design structures that might help combat food insecurity or connect communities to each other" (What's A Macro?). In this project, we can see students develop habits of mind by "deepen[ing their] scientific understanding of ...complex systems through data collection and analysis and...develop[ing] science-based solutions to the pressing problems impacting our local communities and organizations" (Program Overview). Engaging in these projects helps students understand the impact habits of mind can have on society. As a result, this teaches them how to be resourceful and adaptable and use their skill set to develop into well-rounded, and holistic problem solvers. Ultimately, Mastery School teaches habits of mind that empower their students to make an impact beyond the classroom.

The way students relate to the world at Mastery School is through belonging rather than exceptionality. Students are encouraged to seek problems that connect them to their community through their common interests. Their group-oriented projects represent a collective effort to solve problems and support one another when they may lack certain skills or abilities. A student

described this process as a crucial life skill that they are grateful to practice; they learned how to support each other and recognize when their skill ability is not enough to solve the problem on their own (Our Approach to Education). This type of relation to the world prepares students to be resilient when met with challenges because their identity is shaped around strengths *and* weaknesses, and they are prepared to seek help and collaboration when their skills are deficient in solving a problem.

The final case study is Burlington City and Lake Semester (BCL), a school that bridges public and private school models. This program is open to all juniors and seniors at Burlington High School. The difference between St. Paul's School, Mastery School of Hawken, and Burlington City and Lake Semester is that BCL is offered to public school students, completely free, with no selective admissions. BCL selects its students based on scheduling flexibility rather than merit which creates an opportunity for any public school student to engage in an alternative, community-oriented education without paying private school tuition. BCL's mission is, "[t]o empower young people as citizens, students, and community members through authentic, collaborative real-world learning experiences in and around the city of Burlington" (Mission and Vision). About 40% of Burlington High School's students are students of color and almost 50% are economically disadvantaged students (Burlington Senior High School). This program is a rare opportunity for these students to experience learning away from the traditional classroom and into the community where they can explore professions, arts, and other interests.

The values that BCL teaches its students are similar to the Mastery School in that they emphasize community-oriented problem-solving. BCL breaks down its program like so:

First, the programs are based on *experience*—real-world, hands-on, place-based learning.

Second, we are invested in *community-building*, both within our group and in the city

more broadly. Third, the projects we will be working on are *authentic*. Often, they are based on real-world issues that the city is facing, and students' work will be shared with real audiences. (Mission and Vision).

While interviewing Andy Barker, a co-founder of the program, he described BCL's philosophy as an avenue for students to explore their potential when they struggled to do so in the traditional school system. He described the intention to partner with the public school because he wanted to give students in the public sector more opportunities to grow and develop their identity than they otherwise would have. Furthermore, the program aims to connect its students, who come from all kinds of backgrounds, with community members and each other. This program teaches habits of mind to students as a means to "sharpen and intensify the high school experience" (Barker) and to feel "empowered because [they are] being treated as adults in a real-world working environment" (Voices).

The habits of mind BCL teaches prepare these students to engage in collaboration with the community. They do so by partnering students with a professional in a field the student is interested in exploring. This exposure can inspire students to pursue their interests and transform their relation to learning. One student recalls the program:

Meeting with our many community partners through our program has been a wonderful hands-on experience. We learned about things that matter through people who are passionate about their jobs. Over the BCL semester, I have grown to understand not only the difference between education and learning but also the importance of doing something meaningful with my life and doing something that I care about. (Voices)

This student's testimony has not only emphasized the significance of meaningful interactions with professionals in the community but also emphasized the importance of aligning one's education with genuine passions and concerns.

All the mentioned schools in this paper aim to prepare their students to be successful and impactful adults. However, schools that emphasize community learning better prepare students for the "real world" because the curriculum has more opportunities for students to experience real-world demands. Furthermore, these students better understand the privilege of having alternative opportunities to explore their learning because they are exposed to the realities of this world. The reality oftentimes is that opportunity is *not* distributed equally and one's position in society is not determined by their character, but usually by the social position of their parents. St. Paul's has an amazingly complex and intellectual curriculum, but their attitudes towards their students' exceptionalism can lead their students to present as entitled and misunderstanding of the realities of the world they are about to enter. The American Puritan value of hard work and equallying a good life is a foundation of American society that St. Paul's School perpetuates. They do this by teaching their students that they are exceptional because they work hard and develop habits of mind that are beyond the average person. If St. Paul's School and others like it want to genuinely address systemic disparities, they need to begin by educating their students about the reality of their privilege.

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