# UNIVERSIDAD SAN FRANCISCO DE QUITO USFQ

## Colegio de Ciencias Sociales y Humanidades

## Who am I Supposed to Be? The Individual Understandings of Elite Socialization in Junior Students from Quito, Ecuador

.

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# RESUMEN

Esta investigación explora cómo los estudiantes de secundaria de élite en Quito, Ecuador, construyen sus aspiraciones futuras dentro de un contexto educativo elitista. Utilizando metodologías cualitativas, incluidas entrevistas semiestructuradas con estudiantes y personal escolar, así como observaciones de campo, el estudio busca comprender los procesos de socialización que influyen en las aspiraciones de estos estudiantes. Los hallazgos revelan una dinámica dual donde los estudiantes luchan por futuros únicos e individualizados mientras se conforman simultáneamente con los guiones establecidos por la élite debido a temores de incertidumbre y presión social. A pesar de sus esfuerzos por forjar caminos distintos, las aspiraciones de los estudiantes están profundamente moldeadas por las normas sociales y la cultura elitista de su entorno educativo. La investigación destaca la compleja interacción entre la agencia individual y las influencias estructurales en la formación de aspiraciones, contribuyendo a la comprensión más amplia de los mecanismos de reproducción social en la educación elitista.

**Palabras Clave:** Socialización, Educación de Elite, Educación Ecuatoriana, Aspiraciones Estudiantiles, Mecanismos Neoliberales, Desigualdad Social.

# ABSTRACT

This research explores how elite junior students in Quito, Ecuador, construct their future aspirations within an elite educational context. Using qualitative methodologies, including semi-structured interviews with students and school staff, as well as field observations, the study seeks to understand the socialization processes that influence these students' aspirations. The findings reveal a dual dynamic where students strive for unique and individualized futures while simultaneously conforming to established elite scripts due to fears of uncertainty and social pressure. Despite their efforts to forge distinct paths, the students' aspirations are deeply shaped by societal norms and the elite culture of their educational environment. The research highlights the complex interplay between individual agency and structural influences in the formation of aspirations, contributing to the broader understanding of social reproduction mechanisms in elite education.

**Key Words:** Socialization, Elite Education, Ecuadorian Education, Aspirations, Neoliberal Mechanisms, Social Inequality.

# DEDICATORIA

ALEJANDRO SEBASTIÁN RODRÍGUEZ URGILEZ: Mi agradecimiento más profundo y honra más grande para mis padres Roque y Cecilia. Desde muy pequeño me han enseñado los principios que me han acompañado el resto de mi vida y han trabajado muy duro para mi formación. Mi trabajo es el reflejo de ellos a quienes nunca terminaré de agradecer. De igual manera, gracias a Estefanía, por ser mi soporte, inspiración y la persona que me regaló una nueva mirada al mundo, sin ella, esto no sería posible. Agradezco a mi hermana Claudia quien siempre me apoyó en todo. Por último, doy gracias a Dios por haberme llevado hasta aquí y gracias a todos los profesores y amigos que he me han acompañado e inspirado en el camino.

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## Introduction

Traditional analyses of inequality have predominantly focused on the practices and dynamics of the lowest social classes. It is often assumed that addressing the issues present in these spaces will effectively halt the reproduction of inequalities. A growing and more recent trend in the existing literature, however, argues for the need for a more holistic view of the mechanisms that allow inequality to persist. Under this perspective, there is a pressing need to understand elite dynamics and the different ways the highest social strata of society are nurtured, educated, and trained to maintain and enhance their statuses across generations. Often referred to as "studying up" (Demerath, 2009; Nader, 1972), this strand of literature has been highly influential within the field of education, as it sheds light on how elite contexts allow their students to gain competitive advantages over their non-elite peers. Sociology has examined this from both the perspective of cultural reproduction as well as cultural production and has found different themes within (Demerath, 2009).

A seminal study on an elite context is Khan's (2011) revision of socialization in an American boarding school, and how students are conditioned and trained into elite behaviors, ethos, and scenarios. Another study by Calarco (2018), finds how the middle and upper classes carry out practices of manipulating regulations and limits in order to achieve results in their favor. Lastly, Bittencourt (2021) examines the reasoning for students to participate in stress culture and other behaviors that enable elite forms of psychological capital (Demerath, 2009). Most of these studies analyze how the middle and upper classes internalize elite capital obtained from their corresponding SES context in order to achieve the best outcome in contrast to the lower classes. Some of these studies, such as Khan (2011) and Demerath (2009), propose the existence of an implicit structure that defends and "promotes" universal opportunity, yet functions in a way that benefits elite practices. The aforementioned studies successfully discern the intricate "tools" and underlying structures utilized by the elite in the

effort to ensure their positions, often in contrast to the lower classes. They also showcase how these tools are often rendered invisible by neoliberal principles such as competition, individualization, and merit. What has been less explored, however, is how elites interpret their actions and make sense of their positions. This is especially true in Ecuador, with Bittencourt's (2021) being a notable exception. In response to this gap, we conducted a qualitative study aimed at better understanding how student enrolled in an elite school in Ecuador conceive and construct their desired futures.

Building on this framework, the concept of "aspirations" emerges as a critical element in examining how junior students at elite schools make sense of those decisions and actions in which they were socialized. Aspirations are defined as those goals that a student hopes or wishes to achieve and are not limited to existing contextual and economic limitations, such as poverty and migrant status. Therefore, it provides an idealistic and subjective point of view for students regarding their future. Moreover, these aspirations reflect not only individual desires but also broader societal expectations and familial pressures, making them a complex interplay of personal ambition and external influences. The building of aspiration is a result of a complex web of actors, institutions, and the interactions that occur amongst these. Khattab et al. (2022a) describe this concept as contingent upon socioeconomic status, while Bok (2010) states that it is highly affected by a family's cultural capital. Our research draws on these understandings in the effort to explore how junior students from an elite educational institution construct their future aspirations, focusing on the socio-cultural and economic factors that influence these constructions; our study aims to delineate the processes through which students formulate their goals by examining the interplay between individual agency and the structural conditions provided by their elite schooling environment. By analyzing how aspirations are constructed and enacted, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper

understanding of the mechanisms that underpin the reproduction of social status within educational contexts.

The findings of this study reveal several key insights into how junior students at elite schools construct and navigate their aspirations. Interviews showcase the existence of a fascinating interplay between two forces that shape students' aspirations: the pursuit of distinction and the fear of uncertainty. Students aspire to build their path into the future, characterized by a sense of uniqueness that pushes them to take the multiple privileged opportunities they have access to. On the other hand, a strong level of uncertainty takes a massive toll when aspiring into the future. Although they describe their paths to be unique and diverse, the fear of falling off their current socioeconomic position may lead them to rely on preexisting scripts, which indicate how to construct aspirations and how to act when attempting to reach them. Given their position in the social hierarchy, elitist scripts are most often socialized and promoted. Therefore, scripts not only limit the course of action elite students may take for a certain goal, but they also provide a false sense of choice and chance, as these youngsters believe they have unlimited ways to engage with the future. The way students engage in these phenomena responds to neoliberal dynamics, which allows these occurrences to be systematized and also nurtures the sense-making behind aspirations and expectations. A neoliberal dynamic that greatly influences these processes is the individualization of the youngsters, which is consequently accompanied by a sense of responsibilization over their goals and the actions they take to achieve them. Along with these two major concepts, we also encounter comparison and competition, which determine how neoliberal subjects perceive success, progress, and obtain competitive advantage. To establish the foundation for this study, the following section reviews relevant literature, outlining previous findings and highlighting significant contributions in the field of elite socialization and aspirations.

**Development of Topic**

**Literature Review**

The topic of elite socialization has been explored on various occasions by other authors and has been a key contributor to *studying up* tendency initially proposed by Nader (1972). Most of the examined studies utilize secondary and tertiary education as a sample context to scrutinize the underlying phenomena and recurring patterns of the dissemination of elite privilege. Some of the studies that incur into the understanding of elite and middle-class acculturation through education include Khan (2011), Demerath (2009), Stevens (2007), Calarco (2018), and Bittencourt (2021). Given the great complexity of factors that interact in any socialization process, we choose to employ aspirations to assess this composed issue.

Aspiration is a sophisticated sociological term that has been used to interpret socialization processes in various humanitarian theories and studies. Amongst authors that employed the aspirations concept (or some version of it) in their investigation and reflection procedures, we encounter the iconic sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Peter Demerath (2009) references aspirations in his study on prestige acculturation and serves as a demonstration of the term's value. In order to understand the meaning and academic usage of aspirations, we reviewed various scholars who thoroughly developed the concept; some exemplars include Appadurai (2004), Khattab et al. (2022a), Bok (2010), Ho et al. (2023), Dhingra (2020).

In the paragraphs that follow, we will expand on the revised literature behind our two major areas of research, which are elite socialization and aspirations.

**Elite Socialization**

This area of research has been developed as a consequence of the *studying up* trend. In brief, elite socialization has scholars assess social phenomena from the perspective of the most privileged section of society, and in our case mainly examines educational practices. it

is relevant to mention that some of our references, such as Demerath (2009) and Calarco (2018), function by examining middle and middle-upper-class contexts; their findings share a significant common ground with elite-exclusive studies. We consider it of utmost importance to accentuate that the great majority of the revised publications took place in the United States of America and Australia, which greatly differ from the Ecuadorian context. Lastly, our bibliography demonstrates a proclivity for academic inquiries that probed high school settings, with the exemption of Stevens (2007) who samples a northern American university. The aim of most of the sample studies is to identify a reasonable justification for the promulgation of social inequalities by examining the process of secondary socialization in school years.

The shared and most relevant conclusion/affirmation of these academic inquiries is that societal inequality persists due to the emergence of an unjust meritocratic reality. These studies claim that in modern Western neoliberal society privilege and prestige are not directly inherited but are rather promulgated by the passing down of cultural, social, and financial capital; accompanied and validated by credentialist systems. As explained by Demerath (2009) "(…) social stratification and ongoing social inequality is the result of intentional activity and "informed agency" rather than static structures" (pg. 6). This in turn is complemented by an idealistic sense of equal opportunity amongst all social classes. Modern citizens perceive that every member of society possesses a comparable opportunity to achieve success (in an elite-centric way). This idea has taken an axiomatic position and serves as the main pillar for this research niche. In his study of a prestigious boarding school, Khan (2011) encounters an institution that not only provides its students with an exemplary curriculum but also conditions them on elite class culture and guides them into understanding their position in social hierarchies. Demerath (2009) also examines a prestigious American school and finds that this institution promotes the students' independence and right of choice; it also

conditions students into certain characteristic behaviors that will allow them to handle great responsibility and pressure; he refers to this as psychological capital. Lastly, Calarco's (2018) inquiry explores how middle and middle-upper-class students inherit the knowledge and ability to properly engage with institutional norms, which also allows them to bend them to their favor. Of course, the sources from which these social influences emerge are complex and vary depending on each case.

Some of the examined publications go beyond delving into the process of secondary socialization originating from school or college and also question the role of other institutions and individuals, mostly concerning family. Primary socialization environments transmit cultural, social, financial, and physiological capital to the to-be elite, and also determine how they engage with institutional norms, extracurriculars, and processes of hyper-credentialism (Chen et al., 2022; Demerath, 2009; Stevens, 2007). For instance, Chen et al. (2022) analyze how cultural capital permeating from parents may guide students to participate and obtain an advantage in STEM careers over others and also how parental expectations influence the youngling's aspirations. Family influences also play a role in the exploratory process by Demerath (2009), where he concludes that parents are the main factor that leads to early hyper-education and also intervene in and exemplify interactions with norm structures and regulations. Stevens goes as far as to describe how parents attempt to ensure their children's future" by enrolling them in hyper-credentialist activities and prestigious institutions. Other studies, such as McNeal (1998) and Dhingra (2020), explore the role of extracurricular activities in the formation of the individual's identity and social capital. Indeed, by comparing studies such as Khan (2011) versus Dhingra (2020), it becomes clear that the origins of leverage are highly dependent on the context and its existing norms in the sample context.

To further understand the complex web of influence in a child's socialization, we incurred into the ecological model developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), which

references a similar topic. By revising Bronfenbrenner's (1979) literature, we may conclude that the student's socialization process is the result of various levels of ecological influence and the interactions that occur within them. In order to understand the sense-making of the individuals it would be appropriate to consider the superior ecological levels, the macrosystem and chronosystem, which reference the general societal culture and the time period in which the subject is located. This is not a new perspective, given that some publications, such as Khan (2011) and Demerath (2009), reference the trajectory that the elite has had in the past few decades, which contributes to their understanding of current phenomena. In short, what is shared amongst these publications is the notion that parental or family influence is a major factor in the building of elite cultural capital, not only in the direct transmission of knowledge and status but also given the intervention family has on the extracurricular and academic ventures of the minors; nevertheless, the socialization of these individuals is not limited to their families or school but functions as a complex web of influence that includes cultural consensus and time. Furthermore, one of the other concepts that contribute to the sense-making of this byzantine process is the exploration of which mechanisms are used to promote and validate this process.

Keddie (2016) is the main author who contributed to our research on the area of neoliberal dynamics; she indicates how the capitalist economy permeates into everyday life, mainly in educational practices. Khan (2011), Demerath (2009), and Stevens (2007) also delve into the impact of this economic and social system on what Khan (2011) calls "*the New Elite*". The neoliberalist system is highly liable for the dynamics that currently define elite socialization in educational systems and, although we little have literature to exemplify it, in other institutions and societal dynamics (Keddie, 2016). According to these authors, the modern conditioning received by students responds to market logic and the free-for-all ideal behind capitalist progress. Within our framework, there are three vital neoliberal concepts;

these are *individualization*, *responsibilization*, and *competition/comparison*. Starting with individualization, this concept refers to the conception that every individual exists on himself and is the sole author of their human condition, which rejects the aristocratic idea of the elite existing as a community (Keddie, 2016). As a direct consequence of individualization emerges responsibilization, which is also a central term in Bittencourt's (2021) publication. Responsibilization goes one step further and signifies the burden applied on people, mainly youngsters, of taking full responsibility for their actions and the consequences of these. When combined together, given their close connection, responsibilization and individualism are known as individual responsibilization (Keddie, 2016). Lastly, we encounter competition and comparison, which is the idea that the main impulse behind progress and self-development is the comparison individuals have to others. Responsibilization and individualism only make sense when there is a clear definition of success and failure, which occurs due to competition. Hence, neoliberal dynamics are what allows meritocracy and elite socialization to thrive and permeate into the remaining social classes and global culture.

Lastly, it is worth mentioning other forms of neoliberalist mechanisms that have been exposed in the literature and served as a pivotal concept for our research. Along with the aforementioned dynamics, authors such as Dhingra (2020), Stevens (2009), and Bittencourt (2021) mention additional societal dynamics that represent a consequence and simultaneous element of meritocratic neoliberalism. One of these concepts is *hyper-credentialism*, which refers to the goalless accumulation of symbolic representations for achievement (Dhingra, 2020; Khan, 2011) or as Stevens (2009) refers to them, *technologies of recognition*. Credentials are a tool employed by the modern elite to represent achievement and provide prestige to individuals or institutions; these tangible forms of a metaphysical construction serve as currency for competition and comparison, mainly in academic niches. On the other hand, Bittencourt's (2021) research resulted in the identification of other elite practices,

which are described by the scholar as *class disavowal* and *moral worthiness*. Also supported by Khan's (2011) findings, Bittencourt (2021) finds what could be a result of the promotion of equal opportunity and neoliberal responsibilization, as students seek to "earn" or "make use of" their privileged position by engaging in stressful practices and demonstrating their dedication, which is pinned by Khan (2011) as *corporeal effort*. Elites denying their privilege is a term that is also mentioned in Calarco's (2018) and Demerath´s (2009) study.

### Aspirations

Aspirations play a crucial role in the understanding of how students perpetuate their status. Widely employed in academic discussions, Khattab (2022a) defines it as abstract statements or values regarding plans made by young people, which are not bound to contextual realities. This description emphasizes both the planning dimension and the idealistic nature of the concept, which implies that "aspiration" is what an individual hopes will happen in the future. In contrast, expectations pertain to what the individual believes will happen, but it involves the realistic assessment of an outcome's likelihood. As students age, their aspirations align with more realistic expectations as their sense of what is likely available is influenced by certain realities and procedures, which turns aspirations into expectations (Chen et al., 2022; Khattab et al., 2022a).

Although subjective and idealistic, aspirations are harmonic to social class. Bok (2010) states that everyone aspires, yet not everyone has the same capacity to organize and enact their aspirations; this term is coined as *the capacity to aspire*. Appadurai (2004) describes the capacity to aspire as the ability of an individual to navigate societal norms and procedures to achieve a goal; he compares this phenomenon to a map because the subject must move in a certain way to obtain an objective. Given the unequal privilege present in society, aspiration building is not a mere individual attribute; it is highly dependent on the

socialization and agency the individual acquires from their context. Hence, aspirations are implicitly shaped by the transmission of cultural hot and cold knowledge through parental and communal capital (Bok, 2010; Chen et al., 2022; Khattab et al., 2022a).

Moreover, Bok (2010) further argues that the capacity to aspire is determined by two main factors: the confidence to take risks and the knowledge of how to navigate and act upon desired goals. This is where the social and economic differences become increasingly evident. Elites experience confidence when attempting and failing and also have higher access to resources from various capitals to build their navigational understanding (Appadurai, 2004). Even when elite families lack this sort of knowledge, they recur to the information they find embedded in society that is also linked to elite norms, a process often referred to as grapevine knowledge (Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bok, 2010). Meanwhile, the lower class also aspires, nevertheless they do not possess the adequate knowledge or resources to achieve these objectives.

Aspirations are influenced by what is consented to be the norm by the class, and which aspects of life are mostly appreciated. What is considered to be standard among elite families, such as owning a house or obtaining a degree, may be considered an aspiration among the lower class (Appadurai, 2004). Khattab et al. (2022) found that the aspirations of poor-working class students are likely to be unambitious, whereas for students from affluent families, high aspirations are not only the norm but are also more accessible.

However, there is a negative dimension to the capacity to aspire that affects everyone, regardless of their status. Aspirational constriction is defined as the premature closure of career options and lack of consideration of other fields that students may enjoy or excel in, due to a narrow focus on prestigious degrees according to societal consensus (Ho et al., 2023). One factor for this is identity compatibility; Popović et al. (2023) describe the

importance of compatibility between one's social class identity and the future university student identity in the construction of aspirations. This mainly affects poor-class students who are unable to obtain this identity compatibility, leading to lower university enrollment among the lower social class. Another factor is the culture of success, which Ho et al. (2023) define as a strong emphasis on academic performance, competition, hard work, discipline, and high parental expectations. Therefore, students are often socialized to create aspirations that align with the demands of this culture of success. As a consequence, there is a growing pervasiveness of academic programs and social beliefs that emphasize the importance of achievement and competition. Strongly related to this, Bok (2010) exposes the notion of ontological insecurity, which encapsulates the idea that some young people may feel a recurring and unidentifiable sense of incompletion concerning their efforts to reach a goal; in other words, youngsters may feel like, even with all their effort and achievements, they will never good enough for their aspirations. Because of this, students are constantly seeking forms of demonstrating their dedication and value. Dhingra (2020) discusses these tendencies through the concept of hyper-education, which is the pursuit of enrichment education to become more comparatively competitive among students, including those who already perform at or above their grade level and are enrolled in well-resourced schools. School competitions, private learning centers, online courses, and at-home teaching are some of the extracurricular activities that students enroll in to outcompete their peers and achieve high aspirations linked to "success".

It seems counterintuitive that elite students exert so much effort to achieve high aspirations when they already occupy a privileged position in society. The reasoning behind high-class students' aspirations and actions is understudied in the literature. Bittencourt's (2021) study, also conducted in Ecuador, attempts to explore this link between the aspirations of elite students and their actions. He discovered that elite students believe that to legitimize

their privilege, they need to demonstrate sacrifice and dedication. These youngsters perceive that reaching for international institutions allows them to demonstrate their value over their class ascriptions. National universities are perceived as a waste of potential, although students still have little knowledge of the opportunities that may encounter in national institutions. This may better explain why high-class students' aspirations tend to include foreign institutions. It has less to do with professional motivation and more about conceptions of moral worthiness, personal responsibility, privilege disavowment, and search for personal identity.

Most literature on elite socialization tends to overlook the personal perceptions and actions of individuals within these structures, which explains the disconnection between the themes revised on elite socialization and aspirations. Demerath (2009) is one of the few who references aspirations in his study on prestige acculturation. Understanding these concepts of socialization is crucial; however, there is a distinct gap in how the literature engages with elites' interpretations of and responses to their privileges and positions. Bittencourt's (2021) research is notable in this area, as it examines elite individuals' self-awareness and rationalizes their actions and status. This highlights a significant and underexplored area in the literature: the socialization of elites, particularly through the lens of their aspirations. This gap underscores the importance of the present study, which aims to explore how elite youths understand and navigate their social environment.

**Methods**

The purpose of this study was to examine how elite students make sense of their socialization processes through the understanding and construction of aspirations. To address this goal, we conducted a qualitative study in a local elite private school, St. Peter's Academy.

The population of this school consists of members of the Ecuadorian high class in Quito, the capital. This school is located in what is arguably the wealthiest area in the city, and most of the students reside nearby. The monthly payments to attend the institution double Ecuador's minimum salary and may have significant added costs for other in-school and extracurricular expenses. St. Peter's Academy exhibits itself to be a high-quality bilingual institution, with a strong emphasis on developing the pupil's critical thinking, self-efficacy, English proficiency, and leadership.  Through their outreach media and infrastructure, the school highlights their alliances with well-respected organizations, such as MIT, Julliard, and UNESCO; they also commonly display the prestigious universities and colleges their senior students have been accepted to, which include Ivy League institutions. The students in this institution have a great number of opportunities to participate in academic, artistic, and athletic extracurricular activities. Most of the school's curriculum responds to international programs, such as the NGSS and Common Core. In brief, students who attend this institution are exposed to a great variety of opportunities, international programs, high-quality resources, and modernized skills valued by the elite.

Data collection began with a semi-structured interview with the college counselor, who services high school students and most of middle school. By drawing insights gathered through this first interaction, we then conducted interviews with eight junior students. The group was made up of four males and four females, and it also included a variety concerning the student's involvement in the school's Advanced Placement program. Participants were selected with the support of the high-school directors; selection criteria merely required the students to meet the age requirements and to provide a sample with the desired diversity. The semi-structured interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and questions inquired about the participant's social background, family dynamics, plans for the future, and current involvement in academic and/or extracurricular opportunities. Drawing on the insights

gathered through this main data source, we conducted observations and field notes around St. Peter, which included yearbooks and school infrastructure. The observations strived to better understand how the school contributed to the student's socialization and which were the main ideas transmitted; this data contributed to the triangulation and interpretation of the data gathered through the interviews.

Once data collection was completed, we initialized the analysis process. Data analysis consisted of two complementary approaches. The first step was inductive and consisted of periodic team meetings to discuss emerging insights which were later formally written as analytical memos. The ideas emerging from the analytical memos were used to create a coding scheme. This allowed for the second step, which was largely deductive and entailed using the coding scheme to formally code the entirety of the data set. Through the coding process, we were able to identify a series of interconnected themes such as social uncertainty, uniqueness of paths, predetermined scrips, and various neoliberal practices. When we settled for specific themes, we examined their relationship in the effort to write assertions. Once assertions were written, we returned to the data set in an effort to identify any disconfirming evidence.

For the samples and references made in this paper, the dialogue was translated given that the original interview took place in Spanish.

**Findings**

We encountered an ample number of reoccurring patterns, both in the statements made by students and in the additional data sources gathered through observations and artifacts. To make use of all these patterns, we coalesced the emerging evidence into three main findings.

### Uniqueness and Uncertainty

The first finding of our study highlights a complex interplay between the pursuit of uniqueness and the presence of uncertainty in the way these students envision their futures. During the interviews, students frequently expressed a strong desire to forge unique paths for themselves, emphasizing individuality and a distinct departure from conventional expectations. This pursuit of distinction was not merely a superficial desire to stand out, but rather a profound endeavor to define their futures autonomously, ensuring that their life trajectories were genuinely self-determined.

One of the interviewees, Ignacio, highlighted his pursuit of uniqueness by stating: "I believe I'm pursuing a unique career path; I want something different. I understand that everyone is unique in their own way, with their own characteristics. However, I feel that my ambition is quite rare—few people aspire to become a musical artist." Similarly, Tadeo expressed his desire for individuality and explained his motivation for wanting to study abroad: "[I want to live the] experience of meeting other people, different individuals, becoming more independent, learning to... whatever it is. Studying or doing everything by myself." This cultural inclination towards unique paths was also evident in the yearbooks, which highlighted various global options and emphasized that "each student is headed towards a unique destination". This field note supports the claim that junior students construct their aspirations around a pursuit of uniqueness.

Despite this clear inclination towards individuality, a sense of uncertainty amongst the students remained explicit. They perceived that their social and economic status might be threatened by unorthodox paths, and hence they demonstrated a great preoccupation with falling down the social ladder. Even as an overachieving student with vast community service recognition and an invitation into the National Honor Society, Felicia expressed an inexplicable fear: "I feel like I am ahead of other people, but I still feel a great insecurity for when it happens, I imagine that's normal". Her statement evidenced the existence of

ontological insecurity among junior students, given that even considering their advantage, the uncertainty remains. This fear of falling was not limited to school or employment but also incurred into their whole role in society. Esteban captures this fear in his statement:

> I mean, right now I'm making a decision that will last the rest of my life, and it could be a complete mistake or a complete success, and there are so many possibilities that, I don't know, it scares me so much. It could end up really well or really badly. It's just that right now feels like the critical moment.

Students were very aware of how important this time in their lives was, seeing it as a turning point for their future. Esteban also talked about seeking some stability further up the road, saying: "I'm not sure, I'm also interested in things like literature and philosophy, but at the same time, I want a job that ultimately pays off, that I really enjoy, and that offers more security, you know, for the future.". Lastly, the college counselor, Patricia highlighted that the main issue she encounters during student's college process is insecurity and the fear of taking the wrong path, which often leads to procrastination in decision-making:

> The biggest problem I see is insecurity. In the sense that I don't want to be in charge of the "bridge" if I do something wrong. So, the biggest issue is the paralyzing fear, the feeling that I am going to get it wrong. So, I rather do nothing.

This duality creates a dynamic tension within the students' aspirations. On one hand, there is an explicit narrative of self-determination, where students see themselves as architects of their own futures, unbound by traditional scripts. On the other hand, their narratives are undercut by implicit fears of deviation from the norm, which could risk their social standing. The result is a nuanced aspirational landscape where students strive to innovate within the confines of acceptable elite norms, aspiring to be different but not too different.

**Preexisting scripts and narrow possibilities**

The interplay of these forces—desire for uniqueness and fear of uncertainty—shapes the students' approach to their aspirations. This interplay produces a reliance on preexisting scripts available to students. Ignacio, who previously showed a strong sense of uniqueness in his path of becoming an independent musician, later in the interview said: "It kind of feels like university isn't really for me. But in the end, I'll probably end up going anyway."

Students implicitly understood that while creating their unique futures is attractive, these paths might not offer the security that traditional, norm-bound routes do. This is where being part of the elite influences the paths students choose because their ability to aspire is closely tied to how they have been socialized to act within societal norms (Appadurai, 2004; Bok, 2010). A interviewee, Diana, exemplified this notion when she stated that she rather pursue an architecture degree over an arts major, given that she is a talented artist but is afraid of not being able to live off an artistic career: "(..) [referring to plastic arts] yeah, it's just that, I adored it and people told me I was great at it (…) But architecture is an easier route for art (…) It's easier to live off of it". Therefore, their concerns about long-term socio-economic stability caused them to be overly cautious when acting or planning ahead, often leading them to claim uniqueness within the confines of the paths made available to them.

The preexisting scripts, which students had access to, are a result of a complex interplay of different factors such as the school and family realms. The discussion with the college counselor uncovered the striking reality of how these pre-existing paths powerfully shape students' aspirations.

We're working with a group from a privileged population that's used to having choices, and with this notion, the students and parents put a lot of pressure on each other with questions like, 'Where are you going to study? But you're going abroad,

right?' So, there's this idea that because this is an international school, everyone should go abroad. And you are kind of seen as a loser if you're not going anywhere, so the pressure is terrible for the majority who by default tell me they are considering going abroad. Even if in their *heart of hearts* what they probably want is to stay, it's just because it looks bad and you're looked down on if you say you want to stay here, so there's a huge problem. I have students who create fictitious applications just to be able to say they are applying abroad and that they have an admission somewhere else, even though they know perfectly well they are going to stay here. That's how intense the pressure gets.

When shaping their aspirations, students balanced their values with the need to maintain their social status. This leads to them overly relying on existing societal forms of interaction. When questioned whether his choice to study law was influenced by his family, Esteban responded: "Yes, my idea of studying law comes from my dad, who is a lawyer, and pretty much my whole family is in the legal field, which I find really interesting.".

However, the influence of these scripts extends beyond explicit socialization by family and school members; it is also subtly reinforced through the school's environment, curricula, and infrastructure. Observations revealed a great variety of elements that may be bound to elite international schools, such as English quotes on walls, hallway lockers, science projects in collaboration with MIT, and a large self-service cafeteria. It's crucial to note that these features are uncommon in typical schools in Quito or elsewhere in Ecuador. These aspects contribute to forging a social class identity that aligns with the identity expected at prestigious European and American universities (Bittencourt, 2021; Popović et al., 2023). These mechanisms, whether explicit or implicit, ensure that the scripts available to students adhere to the norms of the elite class, effectively promoting elite socialization and narrowing what is possible for them.

The interview with the college counselor revealed an astonishing fact about students' futures at St. Peter Academy: "70% of the students want to go abroad (from Ecuador). The 30% who stay here usually end up categorically at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito.". A majority of the students choose to pursue their studies internationally, while those who remain do so to attend what is perceived as the most prestigious and elite university in Ecuador. The college counselor also pointed out that parents tend to make uninformed decisions, given their reliance on grapevine knowledge; they favor prestigious colleges and universities recognized within their social circles instead of choosing colleges that offer a better academic program or may offer financial support.  This choice, according to the college counselor, is driven by a desire to uphold their social status.

Ho et al. (2023)'s concept of aspirational constriction sheds light on this phenomenon. While the option of studying abroad might seem to expand possibilities, there is often a notable disregard for other alternatives. This oversight results in a narrowing of career paths and potential destinations for students. The concept of aspirational constriction was echoed by the students themselves. Gisselle observed: "I know very few people who stay here. They only stay to study law, as far as I know.". Patricio also expressed his desire, which also demonstrates a grapevine assumption: "I've been told that Universidad San Francisco de Quito is the best. So, my plan is to definitely go to San Francisco de Quito after St. Peter Academy". This constriction allows the perception of multiple possibilities within pre-determined paths. Although students' descriptions of their aspirations do not explicitly suggest a narrowing of their potential futures, they implicitly acknowledge a tendency to follow pre-established routes. This tendency ultimately results in a narrowing of their possible outcomes.

**Neoliberal Dynamics**

In our interviews, students demonstrated an apparent reliance on certain neoliberal dynamics, as exposed by Keddie (2016), Khan (2011), and Bittencourt (2021). Just as in previous studies, market-based behaviors were what allowed students and the institution itself to interpret aspirations, success, and failure. The current meritocratic mindset exposed by Khan (2011) showed to be the underlying tenet for student behaviors, fears, and perceptions. Neoliberalist elements were inevitably mentioned by students during the interviews, mainly when talking about personal achievement and university applications. That said, the duality amongst uniqueness and uncertainty, accompanied by the usage of predefined scripts, proved to be understood under neoliberal concepts and are also highly respondent to these dynamics.

The notion of individual responsibilization proved to be a repeating theme amongst the youngsters. This idea was highly embedded in students' minds, as they constantly mentioned their overwhelming protagonism in their life choices and results. While speaking about his college application progress, Esteban showcased this notion: "I don't know, it just terrifies me. It terrifies me because I'm not even sure what I want to do and I feel that everyone else is way ahead of me (…) I know nothing, I have done nothing.". The strongest example of this was Patricio, who constantly mentioned that future success fully depends on oneself: "It's okay to have help from your parents or whatever, but at the end of the day it all depends on you". Another example is Felicia, who had taken complete responsibility for her college application process and still felt she needed to do more:

> Yeah, since early summer this year I began to plan everything. I checked the curricula [for the law degree], or the syllabus for each university. I found out what the cost was. I made a budget for university costs and life expenses for each university. I need all of this for each university.

Not only did we presence how internalized individualism was in the youngster's life, but we also managed to collect evidence of how this idea was promoted in family and school contexts. Later in the interview, Esteban mentioned what his father taught him about responsibility: "So yeah, from a young age my dad told me that if I want big things, I have to work very hard. The bigger the things I want, the proportionate amount of work". An overly impactful quote originated from the college counselor when we spoke about her role in the preparation of middle schoolers:

> [Referring to student seminars] We start here, by helping students determine what they will do during their high school years. Making them realize they have an empty canvas that begins in 9th grade (…) [We tell them] You have the power to decide how these incoming four years will turn out. So firstly, we motivate them to think about their abilities, talents, and how they can get involved.

As a consequence of their individual responsibilization and the overwhelming number of opportunities, we also encountered a strong sense of class moral worthiness, highly developed in Bittencourt's (2021) study. The youngsters were very critical of their privilege and consequently felt like there was no excuse for "failure". Felicia brought up how, apart from financial limitations, her peers should have no excuse to not get into a "good university": "I believe that if you are in St. Peters, you have had every tool to get into a good university (…) if not because of financial issues, you should definitely have the knowledge required to get in". Not making use of their opportunities felt like a waste of potential, and according to their perception, the best way of making use of these is by entering a prestigious international university or college. Patricio went as far as criticizing his peers for their entitlement and lack of independence, "I mean, we literally have everything. Anything we need our folks help us. It's this and the other, but afterward we must be independent; [referring to his peers and him] It's going to be a whole ordeal". Luciana, the college

counselor, further demonstrated how this idea is promoted within the counseling office: "(…) Because of that, it is important to me that the kids are aware of where they are. How blessed they are to have all these resources, and also the responsibility of using these opportunities". Luciana also mentioned that in modern times, universities examine the student's profile by considering the "opportunities" they had in contrast to other applicants, which further demonstrates how these practices are being institutionalized in the global context. These junior students were overly critical of their role over their actions and future outcomes and felt morally obligated to use their privilege to their benefit. Yet, in order to make sense of their genuine interest, dedication, and progress, they recurred to comparing themselves to their peers.

The sense of comparison is what allowed these juveniles and their institution to define achievement and have a reference of progress towards a proper future. Comparison served as the base to evaluate themselves in contrast to their peers in topics like participating in the AP program and university applications. Tadeo, who we may describe as a nervous overachiever, said: "You have to have a way to differentiate yourself from others. So, I always try to get involved in every good thing and in other people's hobbies. So, they can tell I'm different. I'm not just another guy". When finalizing an interview, Tadeo insisted that we use his actual name in the paper and incurred on the possibility of receiving certification for participating in it; this was in an attempt to improve his competitive advantage in contrast to his peers or fellow university applicants. Another up-all-nighter, Felicia, constantly referenced her peers when acknowledging her university application processes: I believe I'm the one with the most progress on the topic. I feel anxious for them [her classmates]. I still have friends who are clueless about what they want to study, and I'm like, I don't know, think!

However, a very interesting find was how critical these students were about the nature of competition and credentialism. The exact same teens who questioned their peers' progress

and determined their advantage by the contrast to them, mentioned how improper and inefficient credentials and comparisons are. Tadeo, whom we just quoted referencing his attempt to stand out, also stated:

> I feel that people constantly compare themselves in what happens, and what they are doing. They are always relying on comparisons, but at the end of the day, I believe everyone has their own path. Everyone is great at certain subjects. So, comparing yourself… I believe it's a mistake.

Felicia, who we also referenced when speaking about her advantage over others, criticized the credentialist practices that the school reinforces: "[Referencing to applying to the National Honor Society] It is just like participating in a forced community service program. You participate in a bunch of stuff, for what? Just to have a certificate that you belong to a certain GPA." In other sections of the interview, Julia stated that she is currently doing her best to obtain a good GPA. Almost all interviewees criticized the participation their peers have in the Advanced Placement program or other credentialist dynamics. Patricio, Ignacio, Diana, and Felicia all mentioned that they only enrolled (or would enroll) in AP courses that were of interest to them, and not only for the sake of obtaining them as an extra achievement. Truth be told, hyper-credentialism and hyper-education are heavily promoted in the school, and that is evidenced in one of the yearbooks, where a whole section is dedicated to showcasing student achievements such as being accepted into the National Honor Society, traveling abroad for community service, competing in international art contests, and youngsters with UN model awards. This demonstrates a strong contradiction between the students and the system they participate in. They criticize comparison and hyper-credentialism, yet they go out of their way to obtain a competitive advantage and use their peers to measure their progress.

In brief, the neoliberal dynamics mentioned by authors such as Keddie (2016), Khan (2011), and Bittencourt (2021) were a fundamental concept in the way junior students and their institution made sense of progress, success, and failure. The juveniles demonstrated a strong sense of responsibilization and individualism, taking great obligation in constructing and acting upon their aspirations. They also demonstrated to be judicious of their privilege and how they used these opportunities to their advantage, which was also promoted by school culture. Lastly, they compare themselves to their peers to determine their progress and define their current position. In relation to competition and credentialism, they were extremely critical of the true value of these notions and even denied participating in them. Even if they denied the validity and appliance of these practices, they inevitably engaged in these and subconsciously used them in their sense-making.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines how elite junior students in Quito, Ecuador, form their future ambitions. The research also delves into the specific ways these students, within a prestigious educational environment, construct their aspirations. Previous literature primarily analyzed the mechanisms employed by elites to maintain their societal positions yet did not incur into the personal perspectives of these students on such dynamics. Our study, therefore, investigates the thought processes and strategies these students use to set their future goals. By analyzing how individual choices and the surrounding structural conditions interact, we gain a clearer understanding of how social status is perpetuated among the elite.

In summary, the findings revealed that students narrate their aspirations as a complex interplay between a desire for uniqueness and the implicit fear of deviating from societal norms, leading them to seek innovation within accepted boundaries. This aspirational constriction to pre-existing elite scripts leads to the abstract perception of multiple

possibilities within predetermined paths. In the process of pursuing these paths, students demonstrated a dependence on capitalist market behaviors, such as individual responsibilization and an urgency to create a competitive advantage; support phenomena like hyper-credentialism, class disavowal, and hyper-education.

The literature review grounded our understanding of the dynamics at play in elite socialization, crucial for interpreting our findings. Appadurai (2004) and Bok (2010) discuss the "capacity to aspire," which resonates with our observations of students aiming for unique paths. This capacity explains why elite students seek futures that deviate from norms, as they are better equipped to navigate the paths to such futures. Similarly, Demerath (2009) highlights how elite schools foster a belief in the right to choose and an apparent equality of opportunity, both of which were evident in our observations.

However, our findings also uncover an unexpected nuance: the presence of uncertainty and fear among elite students, which does not align with the literature suggesting that elites are comfortable with risk due to their privileged safety nets (Appadurai, 2004; Bittencourt, 2021; Khan, 2011). Instead, these students displayed a fear of failure and a preference for secure paths, aligning more with Bok's (2010) notion of ontological insecurity, indicating a perpetual sense of inadequacy despite high aspirations.

The reliance on preexisting scripts from their elite aspirational map exemplifies Khattab's (2015) description of aspirations as rooted in the cultural sphere of society, specifically, an elite culture. Therefore, the students' aspirations are narrowed to the constricted possibilities of the elite, a phenomenon termed *aspirational constriction* (Ho et al., 2023). Despite broader opportunities, elite students in our study viewed studying abroad as superior to local options, influenced by their elite circles rather than by informed decision-

making. This insight is further explained by the 'grapevine knowledge' concept from Ball & Vincent (1998) and Bok (2010), who explore how elite norms shape educational choices.

Moreover, Keddie (2016) and Bittencourt (2021) discuss "responsibilization," observed in how students perceive and enact their aspirations, believing in their sole authorship over their futures. This belief contributes to the competitive dynamics of hyper-education, as identified in Dhingra (2020), highlighting a trend towards hyper-credentialism among elites as they strive to distinguish themselves within their class constraints.

**Contribution**

This study significantly contributes to the broader conversation on social reproduction by highlighting how elite students, despite pursuing paths that seem unique and self-determined, ultimately conform to traditional elite cultural scripts that maintain their social status. This research illuminates the enduring mechanisms of social reproduction within elite education, where students' aspirations toward distinctiveness, through choices like studying abroad and pursuing prestigious careers, actually reinforce their pre-existing elite status. The fact that aspirations are framed as individualistic and distinctive reveals a form of resistance from elite students against the privileges conferred by their social status. However, their attempts to achieve distinction and uniqueness paradoxically reinforce the existing social class structures. The aspirations of these students still align with established norms and practices that perpetuate the continuity of elite advantages across generations.

The study extends the understanding of how educational and familial contexts contribute to these processes, masked by narratives of meritocracy and individual achievement. These narratives obscure the structural advantages that facilitate the reproduction of elite status, making the mechanisms of social reproduction appear as personal choices and successes. By situating our findings within the existing discourse on elite

education and social reproduction, this study calls for a critical examination of how educational institutions can challenge and transform the cultural narratives that underpin elite practices, aiming to genuinely disrupt the cycle of social class perpetuation.

Also, our findings demonstrate the fascinating shift in the mindset of the elite, not only by evidencing previous findings but by also contributing with a new perspective. Firstly, We managed to corroborate the assertions made by Khan (2011) and other authors, who referenced the emergence of a neoliberal meritocracy over direct aristocracy. Our findings demonstrate that Ecuadorian elite youngsters and their families perceive individual achievement as the sole form of perpetuating (or obtaining) privilege. Nevertheless, we also encountered a lesser degree of security among the elite, in contrast to the findings in Bittencourt's (2021) and Khan's (2011) study. In previous samples, the authors indicated that despite the immense sacrifice students invested in their scholastic preparation, they still possessed a strong sense of security in their future because of their privileged position. Nonetheless, our research encountered students who believed that the lack of effort and action would lead to the loss of prestige and commodities. Authors such as Demerath (2009) and Calarco (2018) reference the fear of falling, yet the evidence they provide for this construction is not as robust as ours.

We do not possess enough evidence to pinpoint the phenomena that may have led to this surprising shift, but we may theorize that this could be a result of global events and changes such as COVID-19, the emerging dominance of social media, a weak and uncertain economy, an overly complex labor market, and the increase crime and insecurity in Ecuador and other nations. This might lead to new inquiries in various sociological fields, which could focus on finding the global and local reasons behind this social alteration.

Of course, we have also contributed by developing this topic in the understudied Ecuadorian context. Our nation shares great resemblance with other Latin American countries, which are also underdeveloped in the field. Astoundingly, we found that our context and the environments revised in American and Australian literature share a great resemblance, which could also serve as evidence for the homogenization of Western culture; this is a leading topic in educational policies.

**Limitations**

The study not only corroborated what previous studies found, such as Khan (2011) and Bittencourt (2021), but also expanded on other understudied dimensions of elite socialization. Nevertheless, in our progress, we encountered a significant number of obstacles, which we considered limited the quality and profoundness of the study. These constraints emerged in a variety of dimensions; some affected our ability to gather optimal data, others biased our interpretations, and a few unwillingly narrowed the scope we employed. Naturally, limitations differed in complexity and impact, and hence it would be irrational to explore every single one. Consequently, we will only focus on the most relevant ones.

Indeed, one of the most influential and evident is the size of the sample. Although the studied population provided great insights on the issue, by adding up all participants we merely reached nine interviews complemented by field notes. Although numerous researchers underscore the importance of depth over breadth (Small & Calarco, 2022), we nevertheless believe this might have significantly reduced the perspective we could have reached with a larger study. Adding to this, although the students were screened through certain criteria to participate in the study, the variance among them was not ideal. If we carried out a more demanding and composed selection process the sample would most likely have had a larger

diversity of perspectives and experiences, which in turn would lead to a stronger foundation for conclusion building. Nevertheless, given the limited authority we had as researchers in the institutions and the short time dedicated to the study, this was not a plausible scenario.

Furthermore, the fact that we only had the opportunity to interview a single cohort of students also restricted the data quality and heterogeneity. It would've been ideal to access different grade levels and ages, mainly the high school years. This factor would have allowed us to have a deeper understanding of the evolution and reality of aspiration building and the construction of expectations. The other ideal scenario would have been to carry out a longitudinal study through different groups. By having a study over time in the same institution, the precision of our affirmation would have increased and perhaps we could pinpoint more complex insights in various dimensions. Also, if we could have carried out an immersive study, such as Khan's (2011), Demerath's (2009), or Bittencourt's (2021) the dataset would be extravagantly robust and also lead to more significant conclusions.

As stated before, the socialization of elite youngsters and aspiration construction are complex issues that rely on a complex web of influences and the interactions among them. Because of this, having such limited access to the student's context strongly inhibited our insight. Bok's (2010) study is an example of a researcher using various sectors of a student's context to achieve a stronger database and consequent understanding; just like this author, we could have carried out data collection in the family and communal dimensions. Yet of course, given our previous academic preparation, our focus on the educational facet was the strong point we wanted to reinforce.

**Recommendations**

Given our insight into the topic, we have identified research interventions that could be applied moving forward. By developing both areas of interest, elite socialization, and

aspiration construction, we believe scholars would be able to further understand the underlying mechanisms of social inequity and perhaps implement the emerging insights into educational and social policies. However, we must emphasize that the scope in which both these issues are developed should be heavily questioned, given that our literature review and results revealed an inefficient and repetitive slant in the way it is revised.

Most studies, especially the ones responding to the studying up trend (Nader, 1972), are excessively limited to probing a single section of society, whether that's the lower or upper social classes. For instance, studies like Khan (2011), Demerath (2009), Bittencourt (2021), Keddie (2016), and Bok (2010) delimitate their scope to the upper and middle class, which leads to the reliance on generalization or uncontextualized studies when referencing the low and working class. This heavily limits the potential insights and contributions when inquiring into social inequality. Also, as a consequence of this limited coverage, most of these scholar publications end up having repetitive conclusions and results. We understand these studies may want to target certain area over the general issue, but the conjunction of small-scale studies does little for the issue they attempt to contribute to.

It is urgent to carry out a proper intervention that could truly contribute to a major theme, such as social inequality, and simultaneously nurture topics like elite socialization and aspiration building. For this, we consider it appropriate to execute a comparative study, which would allow scholars to contrast the revised issues in both the upper- and lower-class contexts. It would be adequate to also integrate a longitudinal element into this potential research, as this would construct a robust database. Likewise, the participating scholars should attempt to take a grounded theory approach, in order to disrupt the continuous transmission of repetitive concepts reinforced in previous studies.

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