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To cite this article: Ilanit Pinto-Dror & Avihu Shoshana (28 Apr 2024): Elite identities in high schools: entitlement, pragmatism, a sense of best place, and apoliticism, Research Papers in Education, DOI: [10.1080/02671522.2024.2335178](https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2024.2335178)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671522.2024.2335178>



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Published online: 28 Apr 2024.



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Elite identities in high schools: entitlement, pragmatism, a sense of best place, and apoliticism

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ABSTRACT

Based on 20 semi-structured interviews with high school students in elite schools in Israel, this article examines two key research questions: How do students in elite high schools define and experience their identity? Do these identities contribute to the production and maintenance of privilege, and if so, how? To examine these questions, we relied on theoretical and empirical reports suggesting privilege to be examined as identity. The study's main findings are organised around four themes that express the elite identity or the privileged habitus of the students: three unique characteristics of the students' sense of entitlement; pragmatism; a sense of best place; and apoliticism, which grant a sense of invisibility. The Discussion analyzes these characteristics as components of identity that reveal how class privilege operates and is enacted. Moreover, the Discussion describes how elite identity and its features serve as a mechanism for constructing and maintaining social inequality.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 September 2022

Accepted 22 March 2024

KEYWORDS

Elite identity; elite school;
sense of entitlement;
habitus; cultural capital

Introduction

Several studies of the last three decades have provided complex understandings regarding the construction and maintenance of privilege and elite identities in elite educational institutions such as high schools (Demerath 2009; Howard 2008), boarding schools (Clarke 2009; Khan 2011), and universities (Stevens 2007). Their findings revealed the use of specific discourses for the transmission and production of privilege and elite identities, such as the meritocratic discourse (Kenway and Fahey 2014), the psychological discourse (Demerath 2009; Shoshana 2017; Warikoo 2020), and the cosmopolitan discourse (Howard and Maxwell 2021). These studies also described elite educational arenas as creating and maintaining specific cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) among their students. The features of this cultural capital include a sense of entitlement (Lareau 2002), a sense of comfort with authority figures (Calarco 2018), the practice of envisioning the future (Demerath 2009), and boundary work (Pedersen, Jarness, and Flemmen 2018). As Howard 2008 noted, these studies have most often examined privilege as advantage acquired by the individual rather than as identity.

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Following Howard 2008 and Howard et al. (2014), this study examines how elite high school students actively cultivate and maintain privilege as a component of their identity. Study data were derived from in-depth interviews with high school students in elite schools in Israel. Two key research questions lie at the core of this study: How do elite high school students define and experience their identity? Do these definitions relate to enacting class privilege, and if so, how?

Following MacLure (1993), we consider identity as how individuals define themselves and offer accounts of themselves. In line with sociological approaches (Clarke 2009), we see this definition of identity as incorporating the personal, the social, and the political. These definitions offer a range of elements and content for examining identity, such as how individuals define themselves, their relationships with the social groups to which they belong, the boundaries they draw in relation to other people and groups, memories, future orientations, and specific practices that express their identities (Hewit 1989).

The current findings note the resemblance of Israeli elite high school students' identity to similar findings in the literature in other countries. These include highlighting a set of features related to grit (Stitzlein 2018) and cosmopolitan capital (Howard and Maxwell 2021). In addition, four unique characteristics of elite identity inductively extracted from the interviews will be expanded upon: three unique characteristics of a sense of entitlement (self-definition based on positive traits and positive self-image; affinity between how students define themselves and how they think their significant others define them; 'natural' eligibility for elite education); a sense of studying and living in the best place (which includes the best teachers, the best and most innovative pedagogies, and the promise of a better future); description and accounts of school choices in pragmatic and strategic terms (e.g. choosing study tracks and types of social volunteer work); apoliticism and a sense of invisibility. The sense of invisibility implies the lack of regular reflexivity about one's social position and the advantages (or challenges and difficulties) associated with it. Thus, a sense of invisibility signifies freedom from constraint (on hyper-reflexivity or the absence of a sense of invisibility, see Bourdieu 1984, 225). Against this background, McIntosh (1988) and Howard 2008 emphasised that a sense of invisibility is one of the ways to understand how privilege works.

The Discussion will address how these features convey an elite identity that serves as an elite distinction and as mechanisms for cultivating and maintaining privilege. Against this background, we offer several research contributions to the study of educational eliteness: examining the elite identities of high school students, exploring how class is produced or discerning the link between position and disposition, and expanding our understanding of how inequality is reproduced through the construction of privilege and elite identity.

Privilege as identity

Privilege is perceived as consisting of the advantages that some individuals have over others, mainly because of the social categories to which they belong rather than because of something they did (McIntosh 1988). Most often, these advantages are not acknowledged as such by those holding them (Kimmel and Ferber 2010). Researchers of privileged identity (e.g. Howard 2008) have suggested that conceiving privilege as an overt

phenomenon rather than a transparent one may help our understanding of how privilege operates and how privilege constructs individuals' self-understanding. This exploration may help conceive privilege as identity.

Like the identity concept itself, privilege as identity has been described as a lens through which people with advantage experience and define themselves and depict the reality around them. Their values, perspectives, assumptions, and actions are shaped, (re)created, and maintained through this privileged lens. This perspective does not underestimate the importance of privilege as an advantage that groups of people have over another but emphasises the link between privilege and identity or privilege as a specific identity (Howard 2008; Howard, Polimeno, and Wheeler 2014).

Students' identities in elite schools

Sociological studies examining elite schools in England (Walford 1986), the US (Cookson and Presell 1985; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Howard 2008; Khan 2011), France (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), and Australia (Connell et al. 1982) maintained that one of the key objectives of these schools is to ensure that their students actualise their privileged status by integrating into positions of power and prestige. Belonging to an elite school, often perceived as a privilege and marker of distinction, has been depicted by several researchers as a crucial influence on students' learning experience and identity (Author 2023; Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Howard 2008). Belonging to an elite school involves self-understanding, which includes ways of knowing and acting in the world and working in accordance with the justifications and legitimacies underlying students' life advantages (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Howard, Polimeno, and Wheeler 2014; Khan 2011). Thus, Khan argued that 'Privilege is not something you are born with, it is something you develop and cultivate' (Khan 2011, 15).

Studies have revealed that students in elite schools think in terms of traits, abilities, skills, and personal qualities (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009; Howard 2008; Khan 2011). Elite schools are replete with resources and opportunities, such as unique curricula and access to prestigious colleges and universities, giving their students an advantage over other schools (Prosser 2020). These school-based experiences enable students to sustain academic success and anticipate a future of many opportunities for success (Demerath 2009). Teachers and principals have described these successes as an expression of meritocratic logic common to many elite educational arenas (Khan 2011). Elite school students claim to be deserving of their privileged status because they are intelligent and committed to the morals of challenging work and strict academic excellence (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009).

A sense of entitlement appears to be fundamental to constructing and maintaining elite identities (Lareau 2002). Lareau's influential research defined a sense of entitlement primarily through the perspective of privileged individuals and activating these rules in their favour. In line with Lareau's study, researchers have described micro-interactive cultural processes associated with developing a sense of entitlement (alarco 2018; Golann and Darling-Aduana 2020; Orner and Netz 2021). Gaztambide-Fernández et al. 2013 proposed that students express their sense of entitlement in elite schools through three components: belonging, alienation, and agency. They argued that demonstrating one's

belonging to an entitled class involves positive feelings of ‘propriety,’ feelings of alienation towards those who do not belong, and the assumption of the right to act in elite spaces and exert influence over the lives of others.

In line with Cookson and Presell’s (1985) claim that the core practice of privilege is *ease*, ways to demonstrate entitlement were reported in Khan’s (2011) study of elite boarding school students in the United States, including how they hold themselves and with whom they associate. Demonstrating entitlement thus involves cultivating a sense of ease that means meeting the expectations of the ‘best’ effortlessly while exhibiting a sense of control, ease, and naturalness. Students in elite schools learn to navigate the world by demonstrating ease, regardless of the need to master specific knowledge. They are expected to make the right impression in social-academic situations while at the same time obscuring the privilege that produces it (Cookson and Presell 1985; Khan 2011). For example, students at an elite boarding school noted that they learn ‘how to bullshit’—create the impression of understanding and knowing, even without understanding the subject (Gaztambide-Fernández 2011).

Researchers have described that the societal involvement of elite students did not undermine the existing order or strive to change the existing social reality (Howard and Kenway 2015). Kenway and Fahey (2015) called this tradition ‘privileged patronage’ (98). The dissociation of elite schools from local socio-political problems and power relations was described in a study by Kenway and Fahey (2014), noting that many of these schools comprise spaces that promote the ‘creation of global citizens.’ Thus, many elite schools in numerous countries foster a cosmopolitan identity and emphasise to their students the importance of envisioning their future as leaders who will address global society’s challenges (Kenway and Fahey 2014).

Study design

This qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews with 20 students in two elite high schools in Israel. The two high schools have been operating for a century. They boast a rich historical heritage and are described as highly elite institutions in Israel. The schools are located in proximity to prestigious universities and have maintained a relationship with them over the years. The schools operate semi-privately, meaning that whereas these schools are funded by the Ministry of Education, they also charge parents fees that are significantly higher than fees characterising parent payments in public education. For example, the tuition supplement in public high school education is about 1,000 NIS (250 US\$) per school year, whereas the average annual tuition supplement in one of the study schools is approximately 15,000 NIS (3750 US\$), while in the other school in the study, the tuition supplement is 27,000 NIS (7245 US\$). In addition to Ministry of Education funding and the parents’ payments, both schools solicit donations from alumni, various business organisations, and philanthropists. Both schools boast alumni who hold key positions in Israel’s legal, medical, academic, artistic, and economic elite.

The schools are typically populated by students from high-SES families who live in localities rated as high SES by the Central Bureau of Statistics. The schools operate a selective admission process comprising personal interviews, language and maths

tests, and various psychometric exams. The schools offer precedence to candidates whose parents or siblings are school alumni.

The schools refused to divulge to us the ethnic and SES composition of their students. At the same time, the teachers we interviewed and the pedagogical coordinators in each of the schools emphasised that the absolute majority are high-SES students and Ashkenazi Jews whose families originated from Euro-American countries. Mira, a pedagogical coordinator, referred thus to the students' SES and ethnic affiliation and to the students' parents' professions:

Look, it's no secret that most of the students who study here come from financially established families, that is, families of high SES. These are mostly Ashkenazi families [Jews descending from European and North American countries]. This is also reflected in their parents' professions; they are usually engaged in white-collar occupations such as doctors, lawyers, managers, and also academia. They can be easily identified.

Procedure and participants

Participant recruitment was facilitated by four 10th-12th-grade homeroom teachers. The homeroom teachers posted an invitation in their WhatsApp groups of students and parents to participate in a study. The homeroom teachers encouraged their students and their parents to participate by explaining the importance of high school research for student well-being and organisational effectiveness. Five students volunteered to be interviewed in response to the homeroom teachers' invitation. These students referred us to additional friends they thought would be interested in participating (snowball sampling). Participation in the study under 18 required parental consent. Five of the under-18-year-old students willing to participate in the study did not receive parental consent. Twenty 10th-12th-graders (eleven girls, nine boys) aged 16–18 were interviewed. The study was approved by the ethics committee of the Faculty of Education at the university to which both authors are affiliated. All interviewees were informed that they could stop the interview at any point that suits them. Moreover, all the interviewees were informed that they could ask us – the researchers and the authors of the article – not to use the interview even if they decide this after the interview. Finally, we offered the interviewees a copy of the transcript of the interviews and said they could tell us if they wanted us to delete or not use certain information (none of the interviewees responded to this offer). The interviewees did not receive any incentive and voluntarily participated in the interviews.

All students reported having a close family member (typically a sibling) who had previously attended or currently attends the school. Two-thirds of the students reported that at least one of their parents is an alumnus of the school. School admission comprises a screening process that includes a review of academic achievements in previous schools, a personal interview, and examinations in Hebrew language, English language, and mathematics.

Research tool

A semi-structured interview comprised the primary research tool for this study. The interviews took place between January 2021 and June 2021. Fifteen interviews were conducted by the first author and five by the second author. The interviews included five main sections: personal and school background (experiences in previous schools, the school admission process, and social involvement); personal identity (self-definition, hobbies); culture and leisure (friends, important qualities in friendships, entertainment, television programmes, extra-curricular activities); future orientation (thoughts and plans regarding the near and distant future, actions taken in anticipation of the future, plans for higher education); Israel's social situation (thoughts on Israel's social situation, social gaps, perspectives on elite schools and their role in creating and maintaining inequality.) The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

Data analysis

The research epistemology that guided us was Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009). IPA offers an analysis of personal lived experience, focusing on how individuals grant meaning to their personal and social life spheres. Thus, this analysis helps clarify how individuals understand their experiences in the world and elucidate their hermeneutic interpretations, actions, and sources of these understandings. The data were analysed in six steps, in line with IPA principles. The first step called for reviewing the raw data, the descriptive and linguistic aspects of the content, and preliminary interpretations. The second stage included an initial conceptualisation of the main themes identified by each of the authors. The third stage included re-reading the interviews in light of the initially extracted themes. The fourth phase included an unstructured reading while seeking to identify additional themes not highlighted in the previous phase. The fifth stage included a focused reading of the interviews in light of the themes suggested by the two authors. The final phase included a further review of the interviews to tease out themes that had not been previously identified.

In reviewing the interview data, especially in the fifth and sixth stages, we were careful to first analyse the interviewee-initiated references to their identity as students in elite schools before responding to direct questions posed towards the end of the interview. Prioritising the interviewees' spontaneous responses related to our efforts to distinguish between top-down knowledge (knowledge of experts, researchers, and individuals staffing positions of power) and bottom-up knowledge (the knowledge of the people that the 'experts' talk and write about), or between what anthropologists call the *etic* and *emic* perspectives. To validate our interpretations, each of the authors conducted separate readings of the interview transcripts, then compared their readings and interpretations of the interviews and discussed them.

Findings

Before offering a detailed description of the four unique characteristics of student identity in our study, we will briefly review several findings that were also found in

relation to students in elite schools in other countries (Carlson, Gerhards, and Hans 2017; Kenway and Fahey 2009). Common among our interviewees was the emphasis on qualities such as focusing on goals, willingness to work hard, competitiveness, and confidence in their success. These qualities served as a basis for determining the desirable paths of action to ensure actualising the students' individual goals. The objectives students set for themselves were accompanied by their awareness of how to act and cope with obstacles that could hinder the realisation of their success, such as prioritising tasks that advance their goals and creating a hierarchy of goals to achieve success in the more distant future ('Priorities are important to me. I invest in what is important and advance the goal I have set for myself'). Duckworth (2016) defined grit as being committed to hard work and sticking to a primary goal for an extended period despite obstacles on the way. Stitzlein (2018) described this set of features as befitting meritocratic logic and the neo-liberal approach.

Two-thirds of the students reported their plans for the near or distant future. These included a period of living abroad, such as participating in a unique *service year* abroad (a leadership programme before compulsory Israeli military service), which operates within the framework of the Jewish Agency (an international Jewish organisation working to strengthen ties with Judaism worldwide); a stay abroad to seek integration in the global labour market; and academic studies at a prestigious university abroad ('I am sure I will live abroad for a while; the dream is to study in Germany, a master's degree in Berlin').

In contrast with Israel's veteran elite, characterised by a robust collectivist approach to fulfilment within Israel (Getz 1998), our interviewees described diverse options for action and integration into the global arena, not only the national one. The stay abroad was viewed as significant for cultivating the skills needed for their integration as significant players in the international arena, comprising an extension of the space of possibilities beyond Israel (Kenway and Fahey 2014). Indeed, access to experiences such as travel and international adventure has been described as cosmopolitan capital (Weenink 2008).

An emphasis on cultivating cosmopolitan capital (Carlson, Gerhards, and Hans 2017) was also reflected in students' preferences regarding popular culture consumption. These preferences effectively serve as a badge of distinction. When asked which television shows they watch in their spare time, half of our respondents stressed that they do not watch the popular reality show, 'Big Brother,' although no specific question was asked about reality shows. The students expressed disgust with the Big Brother programme in its Israeli version, describing its participants as lacking self-control and having excessive behaviour ('excessive people,' 'people who shout all the time'). The Big Brother reality show, as representing the genre, was specifically described as 'inferior' and 'more suitable for people of low status, simple people, unsophisticated people' (Omer, 11th grade student). Regarding class boundary work in relation to watching Big Brother in Israel, see Author (Shoshana 2016).

Sense of entitlement: positive self-perception, affinity between self-perception and the perception of significant others, and eligibility for elite education

The research use of the concept of a sense of entitlement is most often made in the context coined by the sociologist Annette Lareau. In her seminal book *Unequal*

Childhoods, Lareau (2002) proposed that the ‘concerted cultivation’ style of middle-class parenting, which serves as a critical mechanism in transmitting advantages to their children, fosters a key sense of entitlement in children. Lareau defined this concept primarily by understanding interactions with institutions and authority figures and learning how to conduct these interactions in their favour.

The current study revealed three *unique* components that contribute to understanding how a sense of entitlement develops among students in elite schools: positive self-perception, a sense of security that their significant others (especially parents and teachers) perceive them similarly, and a sense of their eligibility for an elite education. In response to the query, *how would you define yourself*, and *how would significant others define you?*, Ohad, a 12th-grade student, stated:

I’m important to myself; I aim as high as possible to succeed and strive for and achieve the things I want now and will want in life; this is a deliberate decision. I’m referring to success in all areas, not just in school, but in sports, future military positions, and good jobs later in life. My homeroom teacher will probably describe me as being smart, that I have goals, and that I follow through with them all the way in terms of investing in them. My parents would say that I am smart and creative and am willing to work hard to achieve my goals.

Ohad shared that his significant others perceive him as he perceives himself, attributing additional positive qualities to those he ascribed to himself, such as intelligence and creativity. Libby, a 12th-grade student, addressed her focus on goals and how she works to advance them:

If I have a goal, I will do anything to achieve it. To achieve my goals, I know how to determine what is more important right now and what is less, so I focus on the important thing and apply my efforts to it, and after I achieve it, I turn my attention to the other things I left behind. I can also be domineering at times. If, for example, a job needs to be done now, then it is hard for me to trust someone to do the job the way I want. My parents will say that it is important for me not to cut myself any slack, that it is important for me to achieve things, and that I am willing to work hard for them.

Like Ohad and many other students, Libby emphasised positive qualities about herself. She cited the quality of being goal-focused, describing herself as having control over strategies that advance her goals (creating priorities). Her depiction resonates with Howard et al.’s (2014) finding that positive expressions of emotion (e.g. joy) by students in elite schools effectively defend privilege, reduce negative emotions, and grant meaning and direction to actions. Although Libby attributed dominance to herself, which might be interpreted as a negative quality, she ascribed a positive meaning to it. Libby viewed it as a quality that promotes her pursuit of success. Like numerous other students, she described an affinity between the positive perception she attributed to herself and how significant others (i.e. her parents) perceived her. In addition to the affinity between the qualities that Libby ascribed to herself and the values and goals that the school promotes, these qualities serve her as justification for her eligibility for an elite education.

The qualities that Libby attributed to herself matched her estimation of how her parents would perceive her. Positive self-perceptions, including qualities consistent with accomplishing scholastic goals, and confidence in self-perceptions matching those attributed to them by significant adults, indicate a space in which a feedback mechanism facilitates students’ self-understanding (Charmaz, Harris, and Irvine 2019).

Students' sense of entitlement was also reflected in the interviews regarding their eligibility for an elite education. Several students referred to their entitlement to elite education against the backdrop of a cultivated overall awareness of rights, thus asserting educational rights they perceived as natural and indisputable. Ben, a 12th grader, commented on his educational rights. It is important to emphasise that Ben was aware that his school's tuition fees are mainly funded by his parents. He expressed his expectation that the State of Israel participate in the funding of the tuition fees in the same way that it funds tuition in public schools. Ben shared his belief that the state should have an interest in nurturing elite children and that elite students are entitled to an elite education because of their individual talents:

It exploded five years ago when there was a fight with the Ministry of Education over tuition. I thought then [during the struggle] and still think today that a [private] school should get the funding from the Ministry of Education. My parents selected this school so that I could get a good education, and they are willing to invest money in it. It's their right to decide that and my right to get the money from the State that I deserve for my education. What parents contribute beyond this should benefit the school so that it can develop and advance us, and that is particularly important. If there are complaints, they should be addressed to the Ministry of Education, not the school.

Ben was referring to a public struggle waged by his school against the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education made their funding for the school conditional upon State funds, demanding that the school reduce parental payments, which were three times higher than parents' fees in public schools. This struggle ended with the school agreeing to reduce the amount parents pay by only 7%, and State funding was fully retained. Ben, who was in the eighth grade during the public struggle, described knowledge and interest in the subject of the struggle and in what he perceived as a violation of the exercise of his educational rights. He based his right to an elite education on his parents' willingness to pay high fees for his education, which he viewed as an important goal. This right, combined with a sense of entitlement, is consistent with his 'basic logic,' which dovetails with the justification of privilege. These findings resonate with Young and Billings's (2020) studies, which found that the cultivated rights consciousness and practical experience in exercising rights tend to characterise high-SES students. Suf, a 12th-grade student, legitimised his eligibility for elite education by addressing options he would pursue in the future:

I think it is essential to have such a school [private and elite]. This school is looking to invest in good people and give them a high level of education. Even if they are high-SES people, [this kind of school] is something good and important that needs to be done. In the end, many of those who study here will occupy senior positions and be successful and leaders.

Suf sees his school as cultivating excellence and thus invests in 'good' high-level education. Suf, perceiving himself as belonging to the 'good ones,' said that the fact that the 'good ones' belong to the higher-SES population is not relevant because the criteria in the school are determined by personal excellence. Suf based his sense of entitlement to an elite education on his sense of excellence and the opportunities the school offers him concerning the future: to be a leader and an influencer.

These descriptions reveal three unique features that contribute to understanding how a sense of entitlement develops among students in elite schools (For a recent review study, see Golann and Darling-Aduana 2020).

Sense of the best place

The concept of *habitus*, proposed by Bourdieu (1977), describes the dialectic that characterises identities: between structure and agency and between the social and the individual. *Habitus* also suggests that the relationships between past, present, and future contribute unique content to our identities. For Bourdieu (2005, 27–28), the *habitus* is ‘A system of dispositions, that is, of permanent manners of being, seeing, acting, and thinking, or a system of long-lasting (rather than permanent) schemes or schemata or structures of perception, conception, and action.’ Bourdieu suggested that one of the main expressions of *habitus* is the same sense of understanding (experienced as ‘natural’) about our place in the social world and the place of others in the social world. This sense of place implies, among other things, an existential and reflexive understanding of our personal and social worth, as well as our ability to navigate our identities and lives in diverse ways. For Bourdieu (2005), this sense of place in the social world is a disposition related to one’s position.

The current study’s findings indicate that students’ identities in elite high schools are expressed through a unique sense of place in the world that includes absolute confidence that they are in the *best place* in Israel’s life spheres. The students stressed that the elite schools, where they study and spend many hours of the day, are not only the best in their opinion, but they also do not know of any other schools comparable to their elite value. These are the best schools that include, as students see it, the best teachers, the most talented and outstanding students, the best and most innovative pedagogies, and even guarantee the best future for their graduates.

During the interviews, responding to questions dealing with the school’s learning experience, the students described positive feelings of confidence regarding their school. They perceive the school as a protected place where they study with children described as ‘good’ and belonging to their class group. The school’s pedagogy is deep and rich in resources, and its teachers are the best and most dedicated. The students identify with the school norms, values, and ethos, describing their success as actualising the path on which the school is taking them. When asked *what characterizes the school*, Alon, a 12th-grade student, referred to the school’s atmosphere:

The majority here are good kids, and there is a very pleasant learning environment. No one makes any problems or anything. I do not remember a violent incident in even one of the years I’ve been here. Like everyone walks down the hall, and there is no problem with anyone, that’s the point. I know kids from other public schools, and I hear stories about things that happen to them in class, and I cannot imagine it. Even in ‘Narkisim’ [a nearby public school], they get beaten up there all the time; we don’t have that . . . this place is really a bubble.

Alon’s use of the *bubble* metaphor indicates the meaning of a school space that serves as a closed system in which he is provided a sense of security because he studies in a homogeneous space of ‘good’ students like him. Ben, a 12th-grade student who also used the bubble metaphor to describe the school, referred to the school’s academic conditions:

This school is kind of a bubble. It’s different from other schools, and for me, it’s really, really good. It is different in the sense that I have freedom there; I am trusted to use my judgment—I

can decide whether to be in class or not. They assign projects rather than tests, and you have responsibilities, and I like it; it suits me to study like this.

Although the bubble metaphor can be used as an expression of detachment from external conditions of reality, the meanings that Alon and Ben ascribed to it are of a place that provides them with the best conditions of reality. They study in the company of good children like themselves, and the school's operating and learning methods are tailored to their personal preferences. Yeheli, a 12th-grade student, described the experience of the place by referring to the teachers and the interactions with them:

Most of our teachers are lecturers or have been lecturers at the Technion [a prestigious institution in Israel for studies in natural sciences and technology] or the university. They teach us, for example, physics so that we really know physics and not just to study for matriculation. We learn far beyond the matriculation material, and then when we reach matriculation, it is much easier for us. In recent years, I have noticed that our teachers really have this twinkle in their eyes when they teach; they have the motivation to be real teachers; they teach us with love and always support us. They do things for us and are willing to help us.

Yeheli's description of the teachers at the school as teachers with a twinkle in their eye indicates an experience of a place where the 'unusual' teachers also serve as a significant source of inspiration for him. These findings resonate with the description of teachers in elite schools as 'experts of the body, mind, and soul' (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2008, 234), who act with devotion and sacrifice as the norm. The students also granted meaning to the place where they study by referring to the school ethos as a place where its graduates are the leaders in key positions.

The students' sense of place, which deals with the attachment of the individual to the place and the meanings they attribute to it (Semken and Brandt 2010), indicates their experience of 'being in the best place,' one that guarantees unique qualities in the present and an abundance of possibilities awaiting in the future. The students appreciate learning in the company of 'good' children who belong to their class group, noting that the space and the interactions with the teachers produce positive feelings of security and worth. The students' identification with the school's norms and values and how it guides them to a life rewarded with options for future success is embodied in the school's ethos and history. The emotional connection and identification with the school are rewarded with a sense of security in the present as well as in contemplating the future. Reality conditions that ensure an affinity between aspirations and the likelihood of forging various life paths and achieving prestigious locations have been termed *assured optimism* (Forbes and Lingard 2015). The students' knowledge that they are ensconced in the best and most promising place and their identification with the school play a significant role in internalising elite identity and maintaining privilege.

Sober pragmatism – 'I have to ask myself what the benefit of everything is'

During the interview, when Ella, an 11th-grade student, described her decision to study physics as a high school matriculation subject, she said emphatically, 'In the end, I have to ask myself what the benefit of everything is.' Many students like Ella described purposeful choices relating to their school tracks to ensure acceptance into the army's prestigious tracks (military service in Israel is compulsory

and serves as a significant arena for acquiring cultural and symbolic capital in the form of prominent positions, such as officer rank and intelligence and computer units), higher education, and the labour market. The students described purposeful choices and awareness, which sometimes contrasted with personal or emotional preferences, regarding studies, extra-curricular activities, and school-based activities in the context of social involvement. These choices aimed to serve what the students perceived as success and the suitable way to demonstrate their class status.

Ella, an 11th-grade student, described Matriculation Track Day, a day in which students are exposed to the assorted options for choosing their matriculation majors:

I left there [Track Day] crying. I knew I had to choose physics even though I didn't want to. It's been a year now, and now I look at it, and I realize I acted like some kind of idiot. At the time, I exaggerated my opposition to physics. In the end, I chose physics, and everything is fine; I'm sure that the tourism track would have been more fun, but in the end, one has to ask what the benefit is in everything.

Ella continued:

One of the reasons I chose physics—and that's basically why everyone chooses physics—is the impact that physics has on getting accepted into places like the *Technion* [a prestigious academic institution in Israel], for example.

Although she described that the choice to study physics clashed with her personal and emotional preferences, she chose physics because of the possibilities embodied in it. Amit, a 12th-grade student, described how he chose his subjects:

I study physics, chemistry, and Arabic. I chose physics and chemistry so that it would open things up for me in the future, at the university or the *Technion*. I'm currently aiming for medicine, so that's also part of why I chose these subjects . . . I chose Arabic for the army because I want to go to the intelligence unit; I'm already in the process of getting accepted to it.

Amit described using an array of purposeful considerations he examined according to their practical consequences. His rationale for studying Arabic in Israel, a country with a 20% Arab population, was not to communicate with Israeli Arabs but to gain the advantage that these studies would give him in admission to the army's Intelligence Corps, a prestigious unit whose graduates integrate into senior positions in the labour market. Noting his love for Arabic in his last year of studies, he described this love as only a secondary gain, of lesser importance than the advantage that learning Arabic would grant him for admission to a prestigious military service track.

Purposeful choices were also manifest in how students selected the school-mandated community involvement activity, a prerequisite for school matriculation eligibility. Ariel, a 10th-grade student, described how she chose her community involvement activity:

This year, three members of my class and I joined our grade level's leadership forum. I do not know if it is politically correct to say, but we joined only because we needed points for our community involvement requirement. We are not some kind of social activists or anything of the sort; really, we aren't.

Ariel described her colleagues' choice to join this activity as driven by considerations of benefit and profit. Ariel explained his choice regarding the school-sponsored community

involvement task as determined by convenience. Choosing the leadership forum grants him a sense of giving and social involvement without commitment or investment of time and effort. He further described this choice as enabling him to be available for activities that seem more productive and appropriate.

The students' choices regarding the school matriculation tracks, how they spend their free time, and activities in the context of social involvement indicate sober pragmatism regarding the goals they want to achieve. These choices are manifestations of the students' acute awareness of the 'correct' way to act to advance their goals: to satisfy formal school requirements and make the right impression without having to exert excessive effort.

Apoliticism and a sense of invisibility: 'any engagement in so-called political or social criticism can only disrupt your plans'

In the final section of the interview, the students were asked to comment on Israel's social situation. The confidence, certainty, and determination that characterised their answers up to this point in the interview were replaced by indifferent, distant responses and an effort to skirt a conversation regarding the complex social conflicts on Israel's public agenda. Although the students described Israel's social situation as severe and acknowledged deep gaps between various social groups, their attitudes towards the subject reflected a lack of interest and knowledge, perceiving social gaps as a natural and universal phenomenon that can hardly be changed. Social gaps refer to socioeconomic disparities between privileged and disadvantaged populations. Due to the correlation between class and ethnicity in Israel, these disparities are also ethnic. Thus, Ashkenazim (Jews descending from European and North American countries) are more likely to occupy the high-SES classification in Israel than Mizrahim (Jews descending from Arab countries) (for more information in this context, see Author 2016).

The explanations offered by the students for the existence of wide social-class gaps were based on the view that people are responsible for their socioeconomic position. This is how Libby, a 12th-grade student, responded when asked her view of Israel's social situation:

Look, I love Israel. I really am, like, a Zionist, but the social situation is shocking; there is nothing I can say . . . The politics are shocking, as is the social situation, because there are so many social gaps that are unnecessary . . . but that's how it is in most of the world. Honestly, it's not that interesting to me; I try to keep away from it.

It is noteworthy that Libby's description, like many other interviewees, reflected denial of inequality or colour blindness, aligning with findings of other studies on elite group members (Author 2018). She also shared her strategic choice to disengage from political issues and distance herself from critical social consciousness. Emma, a 12th-grade student, explicitly described this position and even offered explanations:

All these political matters and all these issues about poverty and conflicts in Israel just do not interest me. It just passes by me. And it's not just me; it's also lots of kids at school. I think that dealing with these issues will weaken us [*Who?*]. All the quality children in an elite school who are going to be extraordinarily successful in every field because we are building

our future now; we must be purposeful and deal with ourselves . . . Social change comes from people who are focused on themselves, and engaging in anything political or social criticism can only disrupt your plans. My dad, who is a successful high-tech worker—there was a news article about him recently—is always telling me: ‘Don’t let all those who cry over social gaps and inequality confuse you. It is unnecessary noise; it should be transparent to you [not disruptive].’ [*What does that mean?*] Not to become one who sanctifies social suffering, but to be beyond it. [*Beyond what?*] Beyond the obsession with poverty, wars, and inequality, let these things be transparent.

Emma emphasised that socio-political consciousness makes it difficult to achieve meritocratic goals in the spirit of neoliberalism (Howard 2008). Moreover, Emma viewed invisibility as a privilege (Author 2016). Like Emma, Guy, a 12th-grade student, addressed social issues, lacking any interest, dissociating from engagement in ‘utopian’ issues, and lacking a position towards it:

Today, we had a lecture by Avishai Ben Haim [an Israeli journalist who offers a critical theory on gaps between ethnic groups in Israel] . . . I personally do not so much agree with this theory, as it does not seem relevant to me. I think that even after the discussion that followed, we talked about equal rights in the affairs of *Ashkenazim* [Jews originating from European and North American countries] and *Mizrahim* [Jews originating from Arab countries]. I actually think it’s [the social distinction] maybe more a matter of the periphery vs. the center [of the country], maybe it’s more related to that. By the way, there are also Mizrahim in the center . . . There are always particular cases, but, in my opinion, it is not like it once was at the time of the establishment of the State. This is a matter unrelated to the ethnic gap.

Guy attributed the explanation for the class gaps in Israel to their geographical location, the periphery vs. the centre, rather than ethnicity. He is aware of the class gaps in Israel but has expressed a complete lack of faith in the possibility of changing this social situation. Guy’s remarks resonate with research findings describing that although data indicate significant disparities between ethnic groups in Israel, the presence of ethnic division is denied in Israeli schools. Following this, there is a rejection of the position that social power relations may account for these disparities (Author 2018).

By explaining the class gaps as circumstances of geographical location (periphery vs. centre), Guy neutralised the political aspect of engaging in the ethnic issue. Describing inequality as a reflection of the peripherality index was described by Nagar-Ron (2021) as part of a mechanism of depoliticisation that denies the relevance of ethnicity in Israel to the discussion of inequality. Thus, the interviewees’ avoidance of a discussion of political issues is due to viewing these gaps as a manifestation of low-SES students’ uninformed choices. In this context, Ella, a 12th-grade student, explained:

Inequality is because of the children. Some children, for example, will say, ‘I am in a [public] school like this and not in a private one; therefore, I cannot succeed because I am not in a private school’ . . . Such children are those who are just constantly looking for reasons why they don’t succeed. Pull yourself up because no one else will succeed for you. A private school does not determine the children’s success.

In her remarks, Ella explicitly expressed the meritocratic discourse, which emphasises that success is a result of the talent and effort of the individual (Howard 2008). Similar to other interviewees, Ella’s perspective is consistent with the descriptions of students in American elite schools (Gaztambide-Fernandez 2009). Despite being aware of the

educational advantages granted them, students in elite schools are likely to attribute failure in school to a lack of effort and to the traits and attitudes of low-SES students and families. These types of attributions have been described as facilitating the legitimisation of elite school students' advantages (Howard 2008).

Kraus et al. (2012) suggested that upper-class individuals prefer a solipsistic approach, whereas lower-class individuals prefer to apply structural-political attributions. It is noteworthy that although Israel is a country characterised by complex and multiple social conflicts between diverse population groups amid expanding class gaps, the students did not address issues related to power relations between groups, racism towards minority groups, or the reality of social exclusion. Their references to socio-political issues reflected efforts to distance themselves from discussing the subject, primarily by their expression of lack of interest and knowledge. In addition, against the backdrop of the interviewees' description of social inequality as a universal phenomenon that cannot be rectified, while acknowledging the severity of Israel's social situation, they did not appear to aspire to improve it. Other studies have depicted the application of meritocratic discourse as a mechanism for blurring the educational advantages of elite group members (Charles, Black, and Keddie 2020). However, the link between apoliticism and invisibility as a feature of privilege and elite identity is unique to the current study, as elaborated below.

Discussion

This article joins a series of studies in recent years that have examined the mechanisms involved in the construction of privilege in various fields of education, underscoring the importance of seeking a complex understanding of social inequality (Howard and Maxwell 2021). Our research posed two main research questions: How do elite high school students define and experience their identity? Do these definitions relate to enacting class privilege, and if so, how?

Four findings were unique to the current study, informing us how privilege acts as an identity and how individuals actively cultivate elite identities and privilege. The first finding reveals three characteristics of a sense of entitlement as expressions of an elite identity. In her influential study on class and parenting styles, Lareau (2002) described how the parenting style of high-SES parents, characterised by concerted cultivation, anchors a sense of entitlement in their children. Lareau defined this sense of entitlement: 'as understanding the institutional rules of the game and knowing how to bend these rules to one's advantage. Children with a sense of entitlement are assertive, ask for attention, and feel at ease interacting with authority figures. These children presume they have a right to pursue their own preferences and customise interactions to their own benefit.' (Golann and Darling-Aduana 2020, 3).

Gaztambide-Fernández et al. (2013, 34) proposed a similar definition but with different emphases, describing how a sense of entitlement 'is expressed through the students' capacity to act and to see themselves as agents in the world' (for a distinction between sense of entitlement and sense of agency, see Orner and Netz 2021, 4). Our study revealed three expressions of the sense of entitlement, all of critical importance given the need for conceptualising and empirically substantiating the concept of entitlement (see also Golann and Darling-Aduana 2020): 1. the positive self-perception of students in different

contexts (studies, sports, and in character traits such as wisdom and creativity); 2. students' confidence that these positive perceptions matched those of the significant others in their lives, an important feature, given that children's and adolescents' self-image and body image are positively associated with their significant others' image (parents and teachers; Charmaz, Harris, and Irvine 2019); 3. the sense of eligibility and worthiness expressed by students in elite education and the awareness of their rights as elite subjects. Many students emphasised that they deserve elite education because of their exceptional habitus and articulated this entitlement in terms of rights ('the right to self-realization,' 'the right to excellence,' or 'the right for the State to also fund private schools and students that will be future leaders'). The interviewees described how they actively strive to fulfill their rights from the State, such as by demonstrating against the State's refusal to participate in funding private schools. Several studies have described how rights consciousness and practice (such as participation in demonstrations) are acquired more among high-SES children than low-SES children and function as cultural capital (Young and Billings 2020). Studies have also reported that children and adolescents who perceived themselves as having rights from an early age and were practiced in the mobilisation of rights by parents and teachers were more likely to demand rights in adulthood in arenas such as workplaces (Perry-Hazan 2021).

The second significant finding characterising the elite habitus of the students in our research relates to what we call the *sense of best place*. All the students in this study shared with great confidence that they were enrolled in the best school, had the best teachers with the most outstanding students, and enjoyed exceptional learning conditions with the most advanced teaching methods, especially in a school that guarantees the best prospects for their future. Moreover, upon comparing their school with others (elite and non-elite), they reiterated that they were affiliated with the best school, an assessment affirmed in the wider society. It is noteworthy that the interviewees did not boast of their status in an air of 'arrogant superiority,' as did some Swedish high school students in Persson's study (Persson 2021, 1), but with self-assurance, effortlessness, and a sense of *ease* (Daloz 2010).

Habitus, for Bourdieu (2005) and others (Hillier and Rooksby 2016), reflects an experience of a sense of place, a feeling of 'a fish in water,' and especially of fitting the social context and logic of the field, or as Maton (2014, 56) put it, 'You are attuned to the doxa, the unwritten "rules of the game" underlying practices within that field.' The sense of best place, as our findings reveal, not only provides an existential experience of suitability for the field but also creates and reinforces an experience of *consecration*, i.e. an experience of being separate, different, and sacred (Bourdieu 1996). In this way, the sense of best place expresses an elite position and serves as an elite distinction or the practice of *standing out* (Eriksen and Stefansen 2022).

The third significant finding reflecting the habitus of elite students in our research relates to the utilitarian decisions they recounted concerning various aspects of their lives, or what we have called *sober pragmatism*. Most students described that they chose their study tracks (prioritising physics and computer science), volunteering (as part of 'social citizenship' lessons), and aspirations to military service in specific units (mainly intelligence and computer science) by gaging how these choices would promote and advance them in life. Many students noted that these decisions were made after consultation with their parents, teachers, and friends and while monitoring (via the Internet)

various rankings about elite tracks in Israeli and international society. Thus, sober pragmatism is utilitarian knowledge or cultural capital that has characteristics reminiscent of grit traits (Stitzlein 2018), which help students plan their future and navigate their way towards populating elite positions.

The fourth significant finding in our research relates to the elite school students' apoliticism, apathy, and avoidance of engaging in local social and political issues in Israel that were expressed by elite school students. The interviewees related to social hierarchies as natural and inevitable, aligning with other studies (Khan 2011). However, they expressed a strategic decision to detach themselves from engaging in political issues and critical social consciousness. Critical consciousness about the social order has been depicted as weakening the elite individual and as characterising disadvantaged subjects. Critical consciousness has also been described as producing hyper-reflexivity ('constantly thinking about poverty and inequality is an unhealthy noise that impairs your daily functioning') or a sense of unease. In this sense, apoliticism is reflective of 'freedom from constraint,' consistent with Bourdieu's (1984) definition of the privileged habitus. Dissociation from political-critical consciousness, or an experience of invisibility regarding inequality and class disparities, was explicitly described as a resource that helps the privileged individual achieve personal goals and elite objectives in the future. This approach does not imply dissociating from dealing with local socio-political problems because of the socialisation of global citizenship, as reported in Howard and Maxwell's, (2021) study. Indeed, the students in our study preferred the luxury of obliviousness (Johnson 2006) and the sense of invisibility from engaging in concerns of inequality because of the existential ease they attributed to these feelings. In this sense, elite students described a sense of hyper-reflexivity as the opposite of a sense of ease (for reflexivity as the opposite of ease in the context of the disparity between habitus and the field, see Bourdieu 1984, 225).

This preference for apoliticism and invisibility as expressions of privileged habitus among the interviewed elite students begs for future research because Israel is a conflict-ridden society (e.g. the national conflict between Arabs and Jews), and due to the blatancy of class inequality in Israel compared with other countries (Author 2018). The elite students in the current study will likely fill senior positions in adulthood and serve as gatekeepers. The students' apoliticism and the lack of educational programmes addressing social consciousness and inequality in the elite schools in our research may play a crucial role in the durability of inequality, as noted by several researchers (Howard 2008; Seider 2010).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the Israel Science Foundation [2505/21].

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