

ProblematISING teachers' accounts of privilege in elite high schools

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Abstract

The research question at the core of this paper concerns how teachers in elite Israeli high schools explain their educational work in this context, given its central role in establishing and perpetuating privilege in the current polarised era. To answer this question, we conducted 28 interviews with teachers from three elite high schools in Israel. The findings reveal three ways teachers justified their educational work in elite schools: cultivating the 'serving elite', helping shape elite students' leftist political orientation and future voting behaviour (emphasising the idea that political leftism serves as a mitigating force against the excesses of plutocracy) and fulfilling elite children's right to a level of education commensurate with their ability. The discussion problematises these justifications by highlighting their features, which, in turn, contribute to a complex understanding of how privilege functions and how advantages and inequality are produced and perpetuated in exclusive and exclusionary elite spaces.

KEYWORDS

elite schools, justifications, privilege, socioeconomic status, teachers

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, many studies in various countries have examined how elite schools and universities fill a central role in producing and maintaining privilege and inequality (Howard & Maxwell, 2023). These studies describe, inter alia, how privilege and equality are produced and maintained: adopting specific discourses such as the neoliberal discourse, the psychological discourse and the discourse of meritocracy (Demerath, 2009); identifying

Key insights

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The fundamental question in this paper is how teachers in elite schools justify the cultural–educational processes associated with producing and maintaining privilege.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

This paper reveals three ways teachers justified their educational work in elite schools: the ‘serving elite’; helping to shape elite students’ future votes for the political left; and fulfilling the right of elite children to a level of education that matches their ability.

interactions of diverse qualities among teachers and students of different socioeconomic status (SES; Calarco, 2018); applying exclusionary practices, such as enrichment workshops, that develop cultural and emotional capital (Pedersen et al., 2018); preference for psychological attributions of inequality and social hierarchies (e.g., individual dispositions and personal responsibility) over social–structural attributions (e.g., the effects of specific living conditions; Shoshana, 2017; Khan, 2011).

A less-researched mechanism that lies at the core of this paper concerns the justifications offered by members of elite groups (Moor & Friedman, 2021; Variyan, 2019), particularly teachers (Variyan, 2019), for their role as agents in the cultivation of privilege and benefits in an increasingly polarised society. Researching the justifications and bases for legitimacy that teachers confer on privilege and elitism may expand our understanding of how privilege is produced and functions, and how the elite subject prepares for power (Cookson & Persell, 1985). In other words, studying teachers’ justifications is critical for understanding the processes associated with becoming an elite subject (Binder & Abel, 2019). Furthermore, the study of justifications is vital as it teaches us about ‘orders of worth’ (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2000, p. 222), which are critical to understanding the relationship between position and disposition and hence to understanding social inequality and educational stratification (Bourdieu, 1996; Courtois, 2015).

The fundamental question in this paper is how teachers in elite schools justify the cultural–educational processes associated with producing and maintaining privilege. This question is critical, as elite schools operate as a distinguished space (Kenway & Prosser, 2015). Addressing this research question can contribute to several fields of knowledge: the study of elite schools, the study of the processes associated with becoming an elite subject and the study of the linkage between justifications, privilege and inequality. To achieve these research objectives, this paper comprises four main parts: a literature review on the interrelationships of elitism, privilege and justifications and the rationale supporting privilege among teachers in elite schools; a research design based on interviews with teachers in three elite schools in Israel; a findings section that includes three main types of justifications proposed by the teachers in our study; and a critical discussion about the characteristics of these justifications and the assumptions underlying them about the production and maintenance of privilege and inequality.

ELITISM, PRIVILEGE AND JUSTIFICATIONS

The study of elites, particularly educational elitism, has flourished in the last two decades (Howard & Maxwell, 2023). This research stream is critical, as understanding inequality and stratification should not be limited to the study of marginalised communities. Whereas various researchers have portrayed the role that elites play in reproducing privileges and inequality (Howard, 2008; Pedersen et al., 2018), an insufficiently researched issue concerns the justifications—‘justificatory work’ or bases of legitimisation—that members of elite groups use to perpetuate their privilege (Moor & Friedman, 2021). This issue is critical because inequality is rising, and the rhetoric of watchwords such as equal opportunity, meritocracy and ‘the American dream’ has retained its prevalence (Mijs, 2021; Mijs & Savage, 2020).

The literature on justifications for privilege and the legitimisation that members of elite groups attribute to their elitism yields several prevalent explanations. The most common justification adopts the meritocracy discourse (Littler, 2017; Young, 1958). This discourse states that success and social status are based on hard work, ability, skills and individual achievement. Adopting this discourse allows one to claim that we live in a dynamic, mobile and egalitarian era where achievement—rather than ascribed status—has the greatest impact on life chances (Fercovic, 2020). In addition, claims concerning meritocracy encourage the ‘individualization of class’ (Savage, 2000), a reference, among other things, to the perception that life chances are not the consequence of structural forces (Mijs & Savage, 2020).

Another mode of justification relates to identifying wealthy individuals as middle class, or what Sherman (2018) called ‘aspiring to the symbolic middle’ (p. 412). This class identification emphasises hard work, regularity, normalcy and modesty. The middle-class classification not only distances wealthy individuals from the stigmas associated with material wealth but also confers a sense of respectability. In this way, the ‘middle class’ acts as a ‘nebulous category’ (Weiss, 2019, p. 6) or a ‘benign category’ (Heiman et al., 2012, p. 18) and represents the model subjects of the neoliberal discourse, which encourages entrepreneurship, self-reliance and self-satisfaction.

A similar strategy emerged from Moor and Friedman’s (2021) interviews of London homeowners who purchased property with the help of their parents and Friedman et al.’s (2021) research on people working in professional and managerial occupations. In both studies, the interviewees downplayed intergenerational privilege or misidentified their origins as working class. In this way, interviewees in both studies—‘the inheritors’ in Bourdieu’s (1996) terms—described humble intergenerational selves, obfuscating their privilege and minimising the influence of their class of origin (and ascribed status) on their chances and opportunities in life. In other words, they adopted the meritocratic narrative, which has cultural value and which, in turn, provides a sense of worth and deservingness.

Another mode of common justification in the literature pertains to moral boundary work (Lamont, 2000). Boundary work relates to how individuals distinguish themselves in relation to others. Moral boundary work confers self-worth based on values such as honesty, integrity, responsibility, caring and work ethic (Lamont, 2000). In Kantola and Kuusela’s (2019) study, wealthy Finnish entrepreneurs emphasised hard work, normalcy, ordinariness and boundaries between lazy and hard-working people to justify belonging to their country’s top 0.1% of earners. In Sherman’s study, affluent New York parents also emphasised their moral values (‘good people’ who consume reasonably, limit children’s excessive material consumption, appreciate the value of work and respect others) to legitimise their wealth and achieve an ‘appropriate habitus of privilege’ (Sherman, 2018).

Further justifications for promoting privilege and advantage have focused on developing and maintaining social justice awareness (Peshkin, 2008), seeking to create a diverse and inclusive work environment (Kenway & Lazarus, 2017), developing leadership based on sacrifice for the benefit of the collective or the general interest (Power et al., 2013) and service

to the nation (Courtois, 2015). The justifications were not prevalent in our studies. Thus, against this background, it would be valuable to examine the unique justifications expressed by the teachers for cultivating privilege and advantages.

Justifications of privilege among teachers in elite schools

Research on the work of teachers in elite schools described them as 'key actors' (Fahey & Prosser, 2015, p. 1036) and 'chief choreographers' (Kenway et al., 2017, p. 108). They were described as sharing 'a commitment to the importance of the place where they work and the enterprise they are involved in' (Khan, 2011, p. 57) and demonstrating 'powerful dedication to the students', acting as 'missionaries to the rich' with dedication and sacrifice as a norm (Cookson & Persell, 1985, p. 85). The relationships with their students are characterised by deep connections and high commitment to their students' learning and development (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009).

Teachers in elite schools are compelled to negotiate the high pressure of 'helicopter parents' (Hamilton, 2016). However, the teachers were described as promoting the elite school's goals by deliberately cultivating students in anticipation of a privileged future (Kenway, 2018). In this regard, Connell et al. (1981) described teachers at elite schools as 'servants of forces beyond their control' (p. 115).

Forsey (2010), examining the work of the teachers in elite Australian schools, claimed that they actively seek to 'rationalize their total involvement' (p. 77). Similarly, Variyan (2019) suggested that the devotion of teachers in elite Australian schools is not an instance of simple loyalty, as they strive to reconcile contradictions and tensions within their work and confront questions of guilt, morality and ethics. This is the context in which teachers describe their hard work and extraordinary commitment to teaching and caring for their students.

Only few studies have directly examined how teachers in elite schools legitimise their work or how they reconcile contradictions and tensions inherent in elitist education and educational and social inequality (Courtois, 2015; Forsey, 2010; Kenway, 2018; Variyan, 2019). Whereas the uneasiness associated with privilege may sometimes be met with a defensive discourse, teachers have been shown to actively strive to make sense of their life circumstances and participation in elite education, employing various explanations to reconcile the contradictions and tension involved in their work (Variyan, 2019).

Echoing the noted findings, the common explanation among teachers in elite schools is the meritocratic discourse (Mijs & Savage, 2020). These studies showed how teachers emphasise hard work and talent to explain success and high status, ideals believed possible in a society where opportunities for success are universally accessible (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Khan, 2011). In his research on elite boarding schools in the United States, Khan (2011) claimed that continued practice of interactions allows for 'intimacy and respectful distance' (p. 64) between teachers and students and helps internalise the perception of hierarchies as 'natural'. As part of this core lesson, students learn to treat hierarchies as ladders rather than ceilings.

Elite education was found to be legitimised not only through explanations regarding the freedom of choice in the education market as well as talent and hard work, but also through emphasising commitment and social justice and striving to improve the larger society (Courtois, 2015; McDonald et al., 2012; Peshkin, 2008). Irish teachers described cultivating moral capital as a means of distancing the school and the students from the immorality of global capitalism. The values inherent in this moral capital were numerous, including promoting a sense of social justice; seeing beyond personal interest; distancing from scandals, corruption and greed; and preferring leadership positions that serve the community rather than pursuing power and fame. These teachers perceived their students as potential agents

of social change who, in the future, will work towards the common good (Courtois, 2015). Peshkin (2008) introduced the concept of 'permissible advantage' to describe how teachers in an elite school in the United States justify cultivating privilege through developing a social justice consciousness. The idea of service for the greater good was at the core of teachers' justification for elite schools in Scotland (Forbes & Weiner, 2008). The absence of these justifications in our studies, and discovering teacher justifications other than those prevalent in the literature, raises the question of whether the justifications in our studies are related to Israel's unique cultural–political context and, if so, how.

Elitist education in Israel: From 'formal equality' to a class education policy

We use Khan's (2012, p. 362) definition of elites as 'those who have vastly disproportionate control over or access to a resource' (for problematisation of the elite concept, see Ball, 2016).

Khan (2012) thus defined the concept of eliteness, following Weber and Marx, as having considerable control over or access to five significant resources: economic, social, cultural, political and knowledge. Understanding eliteness means understanding the possibilities of converting resources into other forms of capital to ensure eliteness's continued dominance.

To define the term *elite schools*, we adopted Prosser's (p. 533) description: 'Elite schools cater to a minority of people who can use their current influence or power to gain educational advantage for their own children, the likely elites of the future, in ways that are not available to the majority of people.'

The field of elite education in Israel can be described against the background of the growth and decline of the old political elite, Jews from Eastern Europe who founded the State of Israel (Shapiro, 1984), and the rise of a new socioeconomic elite that emerged against the background of the accelerated trend of privatisation since the 1980s. The growth of elite education in Israel demonstrates how the leading elite (political, socioeconomic, military) use the various resources and the close connections between them to ensure the continued dominance of the elite class (see Etzioni-Halevy, 1993).

Although the political elite who established the Israeli educational system adopted a rhetoric of 'formal equality' concerning the policy of the educational system, inequality was part of the Israeli reality, and the mechanisms of preserving class affiliation existed within it from the onset. The old political elite, homogenous in terms of their socio-cultural background and closely related to the economic elite (Etzioni-Halevy, 1993), relinquished the idea of realising equality in favour of accumulating power and advancing national goals by adopting a flexible and vague ideology concerning socialism (Shapiro, 1984).

Having shaped Israeli society, these political elites miraculously raised the value of autonomy and fostered educational–cultural separatism based on their right to be a unique ideological avant-garde (a prominent example is the kibbutz elite in Israel; Tamir, 2015). Neo-Marxist analysts (e.g., Svirsky, 2013) emphasised that this socio-political elite created a stratified system of elite education for the elite groups and public education based on an educational policy of a 'pedagogy of low expectations' for low-SES students from stigmatised groups (mainly Mizrahim—Jews whose families originated from Arab countries; Svirsky, 2013).

Since the 1980s, against the background of neoliberal practices in Israel, a process called 'transition from governmental collectivism to civil individualism' has been transpiring in Israel (Dahan & Yona, 2013). Various movements characterised by promoting educational initiatives have emphasised the privatisation of public education services, individualism and globalisation. These processes were characterised by the high involvement of

the socioeconomic elites in influencing education and activating market-force mechanisms (Dahan & Yonah, 2008).

Parental payments (a mechanism known as 'grey education'), opening registration areas, separatist study tracks in public schools and establishing private schools have become organic and legitimate components of the educational system. In the big cities, the almost exclusive response of socioeconomic elites to shape their children's educational opportunities has been to establish private schools. Elites use a strategy of educational separatism and justify it with the right to establish schools focused on unique values, such as schools for the arts and nature, and schools that offer a 'unique' and 'alternative' structured pedagogy (e.g., anthroposophical schools, dialogue schools and democratic schools; Noy, 1999). Private schools, which benefit from public funding and high parental payments, operate autonomously, freeing them from the shackles of the educational system. These schools maintain a selective admissions policy rooted in criteria-based screening tests, which are presented as universal and meritocratic but, in practice, are culturally adapted to students whose families are of high-SES background. The autonomy allows them to choose their own teaching staff and curricula (Eyal, 2008). This educational system is also facilitated by the 'top-down' policy set by the local government and the Ministry of Education, which enables educational initiatives that are compelled to rely on both public and private funding (Eyal, 2008).

Against the background of these theoretical frameworks, this paper proposes to examine one central question: *How do teachers in elite schools justify the cultural–educational processes associated with producing and maintaining privilege?*

RESEARCH DESIGN

Procedure and participants

This qualitative study is based on semi-structured interviews with 28 teachers of three private elite high schools in Israel. These three schools are the best known and most sought after in the country and are recognised as offering an elite education. The three schools boast graduates who play key roles in Israel's legal, medical, academic, artistic and economic elite. The examined schools comprise mostly students from high-SES families living in high-SES communities. The three schools are located in different regions of the country. Two of these high schools have been operating for almost a century. These schools are located close to prestigious universities and have maintained a relationship with them over the years.

Gender-wise, the interviewees were split, half men and half women. Their age ranged between 34 and 65, with teaching experience ranging from 6 to 30 years. Of the interviewees, 75% held extra school leadership roles in addition to their teaching positions, including grade coordinators, subject coordinators, a pedagogical director, teacher supervisors, founding staff members and a coordinator of programmes for gifted students. Most of the interviewees (24 of 28) worked as classroom teachers. The participants taught diverse subjects from a variety of disciplines. Ten teachers taught subjects such as history, citizenship and literature, and 18 taught extended elective subjects in fields such as exact sciences (e.g., computer science, software engineering), natural sciences (e.g., biology, chemistry) and the arts (theatre, art). Three-quarters of the teachers hold at least a master's degree, with 25% holding a doctorate. In addition to their high school work, a quarter of the teachers are faculty members in universities and teacher training colleges. All interviewees were 'selected' teachers who submitted to a multi-stage teacher admission process, unlike teacher recruitment in public schools.

All of the teachers in our sample were born into high-SES families (in terms of their parents' education, occupation and residence in wealthy neighbourhoods). Moreover, most of the

teachers were themselves students either at the elite high school where they currently teach or a similar school in another city. All of the teachers also experienced an elite life trajectory in Israeli society's terms: serving in post-high school prestigious military units (military service is compulsory in Israel) (e.g., intelligence and cyber security) and senior army positions (e.g., officers or command positions). In Bourdieu's (1984) terms, military service in prestigious units constitutes symbolic capital, or what Grosswirth and Binks (2021) termed 'military capital'. After the military, many teachers began their university studies in well-regarded programmes (e.g., law, computer science, neuroscience), followed by a career change to teaching.

The invitation letter for participation in the study was disseminated to the teachers by the schools' principals via school WhatsApp groups. Eight teachers accepted the invitation to participate in the study. These interviewees directed us to additional teachers (snowball sampling). The research was presented to the participants as a broad study on teacher identity in different educational contexts.

All the names of the teachers and the schools have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the teachers, as were any unique details that could identify the schools, such as citing names and professions of eminent graduates in Israel (e.g., current or past government ministers, senior army officers, entertainers).

Research tool

The primary research tools comprised semi-structured interviews. The interviews included three main content areas and related questions: (1) general background (academic training, experience in education and position at the school, e.g., 'What are your roles at school?', 'Why did you choose to teach at this school?'); (2) description of the day-to-day routine of their work as educators (class schedules, pedagogies, e.g., 'What does your typical day at school look like?', 'What is your preferred teaching style?'); and (3) their perception of the teaching position (or teacher's identity; see Maclure, 1993) in an elite school (e.g., 'How do you define your role?', 'Can you suggest a metaphor that expresses your identity as a school teacher', 'How would you describe your relationship with your students?').

The interviews, lasting between 60 and 90 min, were recorded and transcribed. The teachers chose the interview venue, including the option of meeting outside the school, chosen by only one interviewee. Most of the interviews were conducted in the teacher's room during class, in the classrooms or in meeting rooms that the school principal assigned for us.

Data analysis

To analyse the data and extract the key findings, we used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis comprised several stages: familiarisation with the data; generating an initial list of ideas about what topics are in the data and what makes the topics unique; identifying themes; reviewing themes; defining and giving titles to the themes; and a discussion among the researchers about the self-identification of the themes, their content and the titles suggested by each author. The independent extraction of themes by each author served as a form of validity for the findings.

The two authors identified the first two themes—the production and promotion of a serving elite and the support and promotion of political leftism—as appearing among most interviewees. The third theme—espousing the right to an adapted education to promote the privilege of 'gifted' students—was identified by both authors as appearing less frequently than the first two themes. Both authors' independent identification of these themes can also testify to the validity of our findings.

The study received the approval of the ethics committee of the faculty of education of the university with which both authors are affiliated (approval number 071/20) and the approval of Israel's Ministry of Education (file number 1118).

FINDINGS

Resembling teachers in other elite schools worldwide (Courtois, 2015), some teachers in our study justified cultivating privilege in elite schools by adopting a discourse of meritocracy. Some also emphasised the naturalness of hierarchies (*democratic inequality*; Khan, 2011). However, unlike several studies on elite schools (Courtois, 2015; Forbes & Weiner, 2008; Peshkin, 2008), the teachers in our sample were less likely to justify their educational work of fostering privilege by invoking moral boundary work or moral capital (i.e., teaching an ethic of hard work, commitment to the community and public service). Furthermore, our interviewees acknowledged the role of elite education as a space of social inequality and stratification. All of the teachers in our study described the elite schools as exclusive and exclusionary spaces, using terms such as 'class bubble', 'a paradise for privileged children' and 'gated community'. The vast majority of the interviewees offered justifications for the elite school education benefiting only privileged children, choosing to share these views freely rather than as a reply to direct interview questions.

We identified three primary justifications that teachers cited regarding the legitimacy of fostering an elite education: promoting a serving elite; shaping political views in support of the political left; and fulfilling the right of elite children to a level of education congruent with their abilities.

A serving elite: 'Our special students will become the elite that will serve the whole country. We will yet be thankful to each of them'

The concept of a 'serving elite', which many of the interviewees proposed explicitly, was an established concept in the social history of Israel during its first decades, mid-20th century (Getz, 1998). In those years, a very strong collectivist discourse of nation-building accompanied the establishment of a Jewish State following the Holocaust in World War II. This discourse emphasised values of sacrifice for the country, public service and prioritising national interests. The expression 'serving elite' alluded to collectivist values, highlighting the voluntarism and altruism expected of the country's leaders in those decades. Altruistic sacrifice was understood as the preferred mode of self-actualisation, rather than that associated with personal initiative, consistent with the neoliberal discourse that became more dominant in Israel towards the end of the 1980s (Maron & Shalev, 2017). Interestingly, the teachers' use of the 'serving elite' motto did not refer to the collectivist aspects underpinning the original concept that prevailed in Israel's popular discourse for years. Matan (a mathematics teacher) expressed this newer version well. In response to the question 'How would you characterise the educational work at the school?' he replied:

We educate the special students here to actualise themselves, distil their desires and ambitions, and be as precise as possible to get the best out of this life for themselves. We suggest they use, even exploit, all the academic abundance and cultural enrichment [offered] in this educational paradise for their own sake. This might sound like we're raising a bunch of little narcissists here, but it's not that, or at least, I feel comfortable with it since they are going to be the serving elite of this country. The success of our society derives from the self-actualisation of these

extraordinary children born into extraordinary families... [What is the serving elite?] The serving elite is the unique personal talents that our children have, who use the gifts they were given in life from the family and our school to grow on a personal level which, in turn, will bring growth to the country and society in which they live. It's classic cause and effect. They are the small elite that makes our public lives better because they will fill the leadership roles in the future and hold desirable key positions in the labour market... Our special students will become the elite that will serve the entire country. We will yet be thankful to each of them.

It is interesting to note several descriptions and processes in Matan's account that reflect themes prevalent in other interviews. First, Matan emphasised values that are ideals in the neoliberal and psychological discourse: self-actualisation, self-reliance, personal interests, self-learning in the interest of clarifying desires and ambitions, growth and self-growth, and the link between personal and social prosperity. Second, Matan defined the concept of the 'serving elite' as a group of privileged, independent individuals who are meant to constantly cultivate themselves and their lives in a way that frees them from feelings of moral discomfort. Matan's justification is that the students will ultimately benefit the larger society by actualising their personal interests. Matan described this link between cultivating and achieving personal interests for the common good as a causal relationship ('*classic cause and effect*'), which seems to echo the classic economic principles of the 'invisible hand' (Smith, 1937). Third, Matan expressed his confidence that the elite school's students will grow up to fill lucrative positions in specific fields (economy and tech). Matan also explicitly noted that today's leaders, in contrast to the traditionally collectivist expression of Israel's serving elite, constitute an economic leadership (primarily in tech). It was no coincidence that Matan suggested the fields of military, education and politics to reflect the idea of 'classic leadership'. Up until around two decades ago, Israel's elites, aligning with the strong collectivist discourse, filled key positions in the army, education and politics. Contemporary research has shown that the elite's children no longer consider the military, education or politics as elite spaces, preferring tech professions (Shoshana, 2022). Fourth, it is interesting to note the (semi-) apology (and its immediate solution) or rhetorical delay offered by Matan, as by many interviewees. Following Matan's descriptions of the school encouraging the students to actualise independent interests, with which he identifies, he stops and offers a kind of apology ('*this might sound like we're raising a bunch of little narcissists here, but it's not [like] that*'). However, immediately afterwards, he resolves the discomfort associated with that apology and says: '*I feel comfortable with this since they are going to be the serving elite of this country.*'

A similar definition of the serving elite, linking the personal to the social, was proposed by Doron (a history teacher and grade coordinator), emphasising how crucial it is for his students to fulfil their academic and professional aspirations:

They [the students] are truly preparing to become engineers and study at the Technion [a prestigious institution for the sciences]. Truly, consistent with the role of the serving elite, they are instructed not to be lazy and not to live off someone else's back.

These responses suggest that belonging to the serving elite is akin to pursuing self-actualisation, human excellence and the realisation of individual abilities. These descriptions resonate with the individualistic discourse of neoliberalism (Rose, 1996). Paradoxically, the interviewees used the expression '*serving leadership*', which historically had collectivist connotations but has been recast with an individualistic understanding more suited to the psychological and social ideals in the current era of tech and hyper-capitalism (Rose, 1996). Thus, reframing the concept of the 'serving elite' serves as justification for the intense cultivation of personal privileges involved in the work of educators in elite schools (Demerath, 2009).

Elitism, legitimacy and the political left: 'After all, they'll vote for a left-wing party, and that somewhat softens their hyper-elitism and their being privileged kids'

When we asked Neta (a teacher of Arabic) what makes the educational work at this school special, she replied at once: *'The Sisyphean job of nurturing the talents of our beautiful little privileged ones [laughs], of our special kids, and allowing them to grow.'* Neta immediately added, of her own accord:

You probably think we are exaggerating—I'm familiar with the criticism of researchers in academia; my father is like that—that we are raising a collective of egotistic individuals. I am fine with it because, after all, they'll vote for a left-wing party and that somewhat softens their hyper-elitism and their being privileged kids. Leftism softens plutocracy. The world does all right in the end, and there's social justice [laughs].

When we asked Neta why she was laughing, she replied: *'Because I have a feeling that, like my father, the Marxist, you will say that I'm fooling myself.'* When we replied that we don't think that she's fooling herself and that we would be happy for her to expand on the connection between the cultivation of privilege in school and left-wing voting, she replied:

I grew up in the exact same conditions as the kids here. I went to this school when I was their age. From my age and experience, I know that I and all my privileged friends vote Meretz [a left-wing Israeli political party] and not for the conservative right that forgets about the poor. So, I am not concerned. I know that most of the kids here will vote for Meretz or a similar party in the future. These are parties whose voters care about the important values of equality and social justice and are against racism towards minorities, unlike what characterises the right in Israel, not just in Israel but also in other countries. The right is darker and more violent, and I say that even though I am aware that elite education further increases the gaps between rich and poor.

Several noteworthy points appear in Neta's account that were echoed among many interviewees. First, Neta described the similarity in habitus (Bourdieu, 1984) between herself and her students. This similarity or 'homophily', as Rivera (2015) described it, acts as emotional glue between people and facilitates obtaining rewards (e.g., employment, creating a good impression, mutual affection). Second, Neta expressed her confidence (relying on her familiarity with her and her students' SES level) that her students will vote for the political left to justify the intense cultivation of privilege at an elite school. Third, Neta, like most of the interviewees, offered an apology (*'You probably think that we are exaggerating; I'm familiar with the criticism of researchers in academia'*) but also immediately deflected it (*'I'm fine with it'*). Fourth, Neta established a quick link between the political left and social justice values, anti-racism and sensitivity to the other. Neta also links the right with violence and a lack of social sensitivity (*'the right is darker and more violent'*). Neta explicitly describes how voting for the political left 'softens' the elite schools' feverish preoccupation with cultivating individualism and the qualities associated with wealth and privilege (greed, materialism, extravagant consumption and a lack of social sensitivity; see Sherman, 2018).

When these quick connections between politics and social values appeared in Tomer's (psychology and film teacher) interview, we asked him to elaborate on his claims:

Tomer: *Of course, we aren't Mother Theresa; this is not a soup kitchen or the Ministry of Welfare; we are an elitist paradise that favours rich children.*

Question: Is that an issue that comes up at the school?

Tomer: *It comes up and then falls back down right away every time. Let's be honest. Who votes for the left in Israel today? Me and our rich children at the school, and that makes me feel better.*

Question: Why?

Tomer: *Because it means we are doing something good here even though private schools increase the educational gaps between rich and poor children. Most of the teachers, most of the children here and their families, like most of my friends and I, who came from the same class as the students, vote for the left and care about minorities and human rights... We know from surveys, and not only from surveys, that right [-wingers] hold dark views on women, LGBT [people] and Arabs. So, our rich, spoiled children will become socially sensitive in the future and not capitalist pigs, and that's what's important. And that is the product of the many workshops we do here on coexistence [between Arabs and Jews], dialogue and openness to different gender and sexual identities.*

The connection between status and political orientation, as well as between the left wing and reports of tolerance towards minorities, appears in the political literature (Furnham & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2018). The linkage between the political right and conservatism also appears in the research literature (Van de Werfhorst, 2020). However, this dichotomous quality ignores contemporary studies on the blurring of the definitions between right and left, such as capitalist economic ideals embraced by the left and socialist values embraced by the right (Otjes & Louwerse, 2013). Moreover, the justification of the intensive cultivation of privilege, which is related to social inequality, as many of the teachers in our research suggested, ignores critical findings that challenge the teachers' view of political orientations. These studies describe how members of elite groups hold solipsistic views and subscribe to psychological explanations of poverty. In contrast, members of disadvantaged groups view poverty as a consequence of structural–social phenomena. Furthermore, members of disadvantaged groups hold a critical consciousness view of inequality and express social solidarity and much empathy towards members of marginalised groups (Kraus et al., 2012; Lamont, 2000).

Legal twist: 'Just like minority children need an education that is adapted to them, so do our exceptional children'

The first two justifications—educating the serving elite and promoting a leftist political orientation—were prevalent among the vast majority of our interviewees. However, the third justification—fulfilling the right of 'gifted' students to receive a privileged education—appeared only among about 40% of the interviewees. About half of those adopting this justification were teachers with an academic background in law (bachelor's or master's degree). This justification adopted a legal discourse, highlighting student rights and human dignity.

These teachers claimed that it is the elite students' right to receive a unique education suited to their talents. Interestingly, most interviewees referred to the elite students as 'gifted', although most had not been diagnosed as gifted under the auspices of the Ministry of Education. According to Amit (a history teacher): *'Just like minority children need an education that is suited to them, so do our exceptional children.'* It is important to note that Amit, like many of the interviewees who used this justification, is aware that the right to an adapted or appropriate education is often offered to members of minority and non-hegemonic cultural groups (Almog & Perry-Hazan, 2012). Thus, these interviewees placed a kind of legal twist onto an existing policy to justify the legitimacy of the cultivation of privilege in elite

schools in the broader context of widespread social inequality. These processes were described by Lior (a teacher of literature; he holds a bachelor's and master's degree in law and 4 years in a commercial law firm):

You know the concept of the right to adapted education? ... It's a legal concept that is part of the right to education and human dignity. It usually comes up when discussing discrimination against immigrants in education, Arabs, and other minority groups that endure daily racism and institutional discrimination, but what people don't know is that there is also the right to adapted education for gifted children who are entitled to an exceptional education and lots of academic and cultural privileges like we give them at the school... I know that this is not used in law... Now you will say that this only increases inequality, right? And I will say that you're right, but also that gifted children require a unique education.

Interestingly, Lior acknowledged the challenge he proposes to submit regarding the right to a suitable education by what we term a 'legal twist'. By a legal twist, we mean that a legal term, which in practice is mostly applied to members of groups suffering stigma, was applied by our interviewees to elite children. The right to an adapted education emphasises the right of students to receive an education suited to their social and cultural background (Almog & Perry-Hazan, 2012). This approach assumes that adapted education grants children self-worth and assists them in forming a cultural identity. Furthermore, adapting education to students' social and cultural backgrounds (thus respecting the students' parents, language and culture) can bring about positive school experiences, scholastic achievements, developing a narrative tailored to different groups and good citizenship. The right to education adapted to the social and cultural background of students is anchored in international law in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (Almog & Perry-Hazan, 2012). To our knowledge, formulating justifications for fostering privilege through legal rhetoric (invoking the right to an adapted education) has not been revealed in previous studies.

DISCUSSION

This paper examined the justifications elite school teachers offer for their intensive efforts to cultivate privilege and advantage in elite schools (Howard, 2008). As several researchers have described, justifications of privilege in the context of social inequality may soften the image attributed to wealth and elitism and thus legitimise it (Courtois, 2015; Forbes & Weiner, 2008; Friedman et al., 2021; Peshkin, 2008).

The prevailing social construction in popular discourse connects wealth and elitism with greed, materialism, extravagant consumption and a lack of sensitivity to poverty (Sherman, 2018). Moreover, the justifications for privilege are also significant because they give a sense of permissible advantage (Peshkin, 2008) at a time when, despite the dominance of the meritocracy discourse, status of origin or affiliation profoundly affects opportunities (Mijs & Savage, 2020).

The current findings align with prevalent modes of justification of privilege appearing in the research literature: the sweeping use of meritocratic discourse (Mijs, 2021), identifying as middle class (Sherman, 2018) or recounting the working-class background of extended family in order to achieve a sense of 'normalcy' (Moor & Friedman, 2021); moral boundary work, which emphasises hard work, 'taming materialism' (Courtois, 2015, p. 66) and sensitivity to the other (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019); active encouragement of ethnic diversity (Kenway & Lazarus, 2017); and encouragement of elite students to engage in public service or contribute to the community (Forbes & Weiner, 2008).

It is noteworthy that many researchers have problematised some of these justifications, describing, for example, how meritocracy is 'an elitist project' (Mijs & Savage, 2020, p. 397) that encourages tolerance of inequality (Mijs, 2021). Other researchers have described how service to the community boosts one's resume (Power et al., 2013). Our research revealed three central justifications teachers from elite high schools adopt to legitimise the intense cultivation of privilege among their students in an era of extreme inequality. Moreover, the current findings suggest a critical reading of these justifications and urge direct research attention to the problematising of these justifications.

Regarding the first justification—the 'serving elite'—the interviewees took a familiar concept, historically associated with collectivist culture and values, and fashioned it into a paradigm of individualism. In this regard, the teachers in the current sample revised its meaning entirely. Whereas the original concept of a serving elite relates to values of sacrifice and altruism—neglecting personal interests for the common good (Getz, 1998)—the teachers in our study individualised the concept, describing how schools that cultivate the individual interests of their privileged students will actually benefit the common good, similar to claims harkening back to classical economics (Smith, 1937). The teachers also made extensive use of emotional and social ideals from the psychological and neoliberal discourses, emphasising that it is the establishment of a do-it-yourself biography, self-actualisation, personal initiative and the ongoing work of personal development that will lead to society's welfare and the common good. To this end, it is important to note that our interviewees did not report encouraging their students to seek positions in the public sector, educational leadership or community service, as was found among elite high school students in Ireland (Courtois, 2015) or elite university students in France (Power et al., 2013). The accounts of the teachers in the current sample echo those of Oxford University students, who emphasised 'self-actualization and a portfolio career' (Power et al., 2013, p. 582).

The second justification was that the teachers were confident that their students would adopt the political left when they reached adulthood. In imagining their habitus, the teachers linked their own vote for the left and that of their students in the future based on coming from similar family backgrounds. The teachers held that voting for the political left was more prevalent among higher SES classes (see Furnham & Fenton-O'Creevy, 2018) and was associated with socialism, social justice, social solidarity and anti-racism. In this way, the teachers viewed voting for the political left as softening the educational work at private schools that stresses hyper-individualism, capitalism and a major preoccupation with personal interests. However, it became clear that the interviewed teachers, in their dichotomous descriptions of the political right and left, completely discounted the associated complexities where, paradoxically, socialist engagement may be expressed on the right, and a lack of preoccupation with social justice and inequality may be found on the left (Otjes & Louwerse, 2013).

Furthermore, the teachers reported encouraging their students' leftist political orientations and pointed to school workshops linked to leftist concepts (e.g., coexistence between Arabs and Jews and tolerance and anti-racism) as symbolic capital or a badge of distinction. Thus, the interviewees explicitly claimed that politically left perspectives serve as a marker for identifying people of 'quality'. These descriptions not only glorify the privileged students' elite identity but also diminish, if only covertly (or through what Bourdieu, 2003 referred to as 'symbolic violence'), those subjects who do not hold leftist political orientations.

The third justification proposed for the cultivation of privilege among students in elite schools embraced a legal discourse addressing students' right to suitable education (Almog & Perry-Hazan, 2012). To this end, several teachers claimed that the elite schools' students (whom they frequently described as '*high-quality*' and '*gifted*') deserve the kind of education that is adapted to their particular talents and qualities. These descriptions are reflective of boundary work (Lamont, 2000), distinguishing between elite students and 'regular students', with the latter comprising those not enrolled in elite schools, primarily lower-SES students. Treating

elite students as 'gifted', despite most of the students not having been diagnosed as such, is critical to the self-construction of elite students. Charmaz et al. (2019), describing symbolic interactionism, proposed that the way individuals perceive significant others influences the formation of their self-image. As in other studies on elite students, the teachers in our study also reported encouraging a self-perception of uniqueness among their students, contributing to their accrued cultural capital that reinforces privilege and inequality (Lareau, 2002).

The third justification—the legal notion of a right to suitable education—constitutes a twist on the law offered by the teachers in our study. Fulfilling rights to education, as applied in courts of law, typically pertains to minority groups that suffer from stigma, discrimination and manifestations of daily racism. The teachers who claimed this right to adapted or suitable education were familiar with the concept's prevalent legal usage and sought to apply the right to suitable education to privileged students based on their unique cultural background. The claim was not only that elite students are 'gifted' but that they have the extraordinary qualities of future leaders (primarily in business) who will fill lucrative positions in the labour market as adults. As with the other two, this third justification is a rhetorical tack to assert elite status and subjectivity. Highlighting teacher justifications can likewise enlighten us regarding how status works, how privilege functions and how different educational spaces construct classed subjects that establish and reinforce elitism and privilege. In this regard, it is important to remember, as Gaztambide-Fernández and Maudlin (2016, p. 60) aptly asserted: *'Eliteness is not a fait accompli—it is a process that must be achieved.'*

Recommendations for future studies

It is important to examine teacher justifications in other elite schools as well (e.g., public and private schools, and alternative schools like anthroposophical and democratic schools that are populated in many countries by students from high-SES families; see Kraftl, 2013). It is also important to investigate teacher justifications in countries of differing political and cultural features.

This paper is based solely on interviews with teachers. It will be very important to also interview students to ascertain their perspective on the elite school's identity and its credo of fostering privilege in the students, comparing their views with their teachers' justifications. Students could also be asked about their position regarding leftist political messages disseminated in the school and how they may serve to soften the plutocracy associated with elite schools. Moreover, interviews with principals, parents and officials in the Ministry of Education and local municipalities can facilitate a more comprehensive analysis of the proclaimed justifications for the educational work and privilege in elite schools. The link between the justifications of the various social actors can expand our work on how privilege is nurtured and maintained. A third proposition relates to the linkage between elite education and rights consciousness. The teachers in our studies adopted legal language often used concerning marginalised populations (i.e., the right to adapted education), examining the extent to which legal and liberal discourse (i.e., protecting individual rights) can enlighten us regarding how new or unusual discourses can justify privilege and inequality.

Recommendations for practical educational policy

The justifications for fostering privilege and elite identities offered by the teachers in our study were notable by the absence (or rejection) of any critical political explanations for privilege and inequality. The lack of social–political explanations or the absence of critical social consciousness, as several researchers have claimed (Khan, 2011), can be viewed as contributing to

social inequality and educational stratification. It is critical to enlighten social actors operating in elite educational spaces (teachers, principals, students, parents and other educational officials) on how critical consciousness among members of elite groups may facilitate a reduction of gaps (Howard, 2008). Against this background, unique programmes and workshops can be designed for teachers in elite schools to develop critical social consciousness or a political reading of hierarchies that are heretofore perceived as 'natural' (Howard, 2008.) Against the background of our findings, we also propose designing courses and training for teachers during their teacher training at academic institutions. These courses can introduce critical education theories, highlight the linkage between structural locations and self-concept, and demonstrate how specific social orders maintain our justifications.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

For ethical reasons, supporting data is not available.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study received the approval of the ethics committee of the faculty of education of the university with which both authors are affiliated (approval number 071/20) and the approval of Israel's Ministry of Education (file number 1118).

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