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The Making of New Elites and the Reproduction of Social Inequality at St. Paul's: An Analysis from the Perspective of Classical Sociological Theories

Weilong Li[1]

[1] Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, United States

Correspondence: Weilong Li, Department of Sociology, University of Pennsylvania, United States.

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Abstract

This paper examines how social inequality is reproduced in elite educational institutions through a meritocratic system, using Shamus Khan's Privilege: The Making of Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School as a case study. Drawing upon classical sociological theories, including Goffman's performance theory, Weber's work ethic, and Veblen's concept of vicarious consumption, the paper explores how the new elite learn to maintain their social status. It argues that, while the appearance of diversity and meritocracy in these elite spaces suggests equality, these institutions continue to cultivate privilege through subtle yet powerful social practices. Key mechanisms include the cultivation of 'ease' in social situations, the performance of 'hard work,' and the idealization of students as inherently extraordinary. The study also investigates the role of elite parents, arguing that sending children to prestigious schools serves as a form of vicarious consumption, displaying the family's wealth and social capital. Despite the appearance of openness and fluid social mobility, the paper concludes that access to elite training remains restricted, reinforcing entrenched inequalities.

Keywords: Elite Education, Social Inequality, Meritocracy, Vicarious Consumption, Cultural Reproduction

1. Introduction

During the past half century, the American society appears to have become increasingly equal, especially after the affirmative action, in which a series of reforms were implemented to reduce disparities and unfairness for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups. Rights and opportunities were granted to women, ethnical minorities, LGBTQ communities, etc., in various aspects of life. These movements created an impression that the society was just and open, that common people had the chance of competing with the privileged on a fair ground, and that everyone could be successful as long as they work hard or are talented enough (Arum & Roksa, 2011). However, Shamus Khan disagrees with this view. In his book, Privilege: The Making of Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School (Khan, 2011), he argues that the society is merely more diverse but far from being equal. Given the fact that the elite group now consists of people from various backgrounds rather than exclusively WASP, and that the distinction between classes becomes less visible and the elites seem to share many common places with people from lower classes, inequalities persist and will continue to exist, just in a different form.

Khan (2015) further expands on the notion of 'ease' among elites, showing how institutions like St. Paul's shape students' experiences in ways that subtly reinforce inequality. The 'ease' cultivated in these environments is a form of social capital that helps students navigate elite spaces while masking the advantages they possess (Khan, 2015).

Through his observations and experiences in St. Paul's school, one of the most prestigious boarding school where he graduated ten year ago, Khan illustrates how new elites learn to maintain their social status in a very different way from their previous generations, and how social inequalities are reinforced in this elite institution by cultivating an "omnivorous" culture and an "at-ease" habit for its students. As Cookson and Persell (1985) demonstrate, elite boarding schools serve as training grounds for America's upper class, where students learn not only academic skills but also social norms essential for elite status (Cookson & Persell. 1985). Ball (2003) further argues that elite educational institutions are not simply schools but are strategically used by upper and middle classes to sustain and transmit social advantage, reinforcing existing inequalities under the guise of meritocracy (Ball, 2003). This paper draws connections between this book and a few classical sociological theories, mainly from Goffman's performance theory in The

Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Goffman, 1959), as well as Weber's idea of work ethic in The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism (Weber, 1930), and Veblen's concept of vicarious consumption in The Theory of Leisure Class (Veblen, 1899), to help more deeply understand how mentalities and behaviors of the new elites are developed and formed in this elite boarding school under a meritocracy system and how this process is related to the paradox of "democratic inequality".

Goffman's theory has been pivotal in understanding the behaviors of elites, particularly through the lens of front stage and back stage performances. Scholars have applied this framework to analyze how social class distinctions are maintained through performative actions, particularly in elite educational settings. Hochschild (1979) extends Goffman's ideas by exploring emotional labor, which is also relevant to the emotional work required of elite students to appear at ease in social situations (Hochschild, 1979).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital offers an insightful explanation of how elite institutions like St. Paul's facilitate the reproduction of privilege. By providing access to cultural resources, these schools allow students to accumulate symbolic capital that enhances their ability to maintain elite status in society (Bourdieu, 1986).

2. Methodology

This study employs a theoretical analysis grounded in classical sociological theories to interpret the processes and practices observed within elite educational settings, specifically focusing on St. Paul's School as documented in Shamus Khan's *Privilege: The Making of Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*. Drawing from Erving Goffman's performance theory, Max Weber's work ethic concept, and Thorstein Veblen's notion of vicarious consumption, the study seeks to understand how elite institutions contribute to the reproduction of social inequality under the guise of meritocracy.

A literature-based approach was used to systematically apply these theories to the observed behaviors and institutional practices at St. Paul's. This method involves close readings and interpretations of both primary texts (such as *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* by Goffman, and *The Theory of the Leisure Class* by Veblen) and secondary literature on elite education. By connecting sociological theory to the empirical observations reported by Khan, this paper analyzes how elite institutions use socialization processes and symbolic capital to cultivate traits like "ease" and "effortless superiority" among students, ultimately reinforcing social stratification. This approach allows for a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that perpetuate social inequality within meritocratic frameworks, despite a surface-level commitment to diversity and inclusion.

3. Perform as an Elite

3.1 Performance and Audience

At St. Paul's, much of the education is devoted to train students how to carry themselves, and the purpose is making them feel at ease in any social situation. This ease is not something that students born with, not even for those who are from extremely privileged backgrounds, but a skill that is gained through repeated experiences in elite contexts and a performance that needs practice to look natural and seamless. In The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life (Goffman, 1959), Goffman define performance as

> "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants."

For students at St. Paul's, they learn all kinds of performances that are essential for being elites. The ultimate goal is that students are able to give these performances on any occasions in their following lives and leave their audience an impression that they are "at ease". This ease of privilege is cultivated through multiple methods. One of the most typical examples is the seated dinner, a formal meal that gathers all students and faculty members. It takes place biweekly in the chapel, also known as the "Harry Potter room", the most symbolic and splendid architecture on campus.

The dress code for the seated meal is strict. Boys must wear a blazer and a tie, and girls usually go with a black evening dress. These attires are not what students would wear in daily life, and many of them initially feel constrained and uncomfortable. However, the formal meal vividly mimics common social events of American elite class, a situation they might face quite often in the future. The frequency of this formal meal being held makes sure that students get sufficiently familiar with it and are able to handle with ease. Meanwhile, they are learning a key part of elite culture, "dress formally while act casually".

In this meal, students are seated mixing with faculty members. In other words, students not only need to stay with peers who are in similar status with them but also with people who are in higher positions within the school hierarchy. To put it in Goffman's performance theory, students perform in front of different audiences. Goffman defines audience as follow,

> "taking a particular participant and his performance as a basic point of reference, we may refer to

> those who contribute the other performances as the audience."

Goffman's theory has been pivotal in understanding the behaviors of elites, particularly through the lens of front stage and back stage performances. Savage, Warde, and Devine (2005) argue that social, cultural, and symbolic capital collectively sustain social inequalities, which is evident in the traditional practices and symbols upheld in elite institutions like St. Paul's (Savage, Warde, & Devine, 2005). Lamont and Lareau (1988) further expand upon Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, showing how elite institutions like St. Paul's facilitate the reproduction of privilege by fostering specific cultural skills and tastes that reinforce social hierarchies (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Scholars have applied this framework to analyze how social class distinctions are maintained through performative actions, particularly in elite educational settings. Hochschild (1979) extends Goffman's ideas by exploring emotional labor, which is also relevant to the emotional work required of elite students to appear at ease in social situations (Hochschild, 1979).

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital offers an insightful explanation of how elite institutions like St. Paul's facilitate the reproduction of privilege. By providing access to cultural resources, these schools allow students to accumulate symbolic capital that enhances their ability to maintain elite status in society (Bourdieu, 1986).

Sitting with both peer students and faculty members, students learn how to make proper table conversations and discern what is acceptable and unacceptable in formal interactions. More generally, they learn how to perform in front of audiences from different social positions and deal with complex interpersonal relationships at ease.

The seated meal is not organized to feed students with fancy food, and according to the book, the food is often not very tasty. But rather this meal is carefully designed to make students be comfortable around elite tastes and sensibilities. Students should not feel uneasy in their formal dresses nor should they be anxious about having formal dinner with faculty members. At the end of the day, dressing formally and eating at delicate places like the chapel with people from high status is taken as a "non-event" to them. They could care less, and they could perform the role of elite at ease.

3.2 Two Types of Performers

Khan points out that, this performance as elites is based on the belief that St. Paul's way of acting is the natural way to act, and this way is how the real world works. Many students accept this concept while others may seem to accept it, while at the bottom of their hearts, have not faith in it. In other words, some performers are convinced by their performances while others are not. These two kinds of performers are defined as cynical performer and sincere performer by Goffman. This notion of 'performance' aligns with Bourdieu and Passeron's (1990) theory of social reproduction, where educational institutions not only transmit knowledge but also social norms and values that perpetuate class distinctions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

> "when an individual has no belief in his own act and no ultimate concern with the beliefs of his audience, we may call him 'cynical', reserving the term 'sincere' for individuals who believe in the impression fostered by their own performance."

Two students in the book, Carla and George exemplify these two concepts. Carla is a role model student in school now but did badly at the beginning. When sharing her secret of excelling in St. Paul's, she simply said "bullshit your way through". She uses her papers as an example. Looking back at her past papers that didn't receive good grades, she believes they are not any worse than the papers she wrote later. They are the same thing but just presented in different ways. However, in order to be successful in school, she made the transformation. She learned to talk and write in a way that teachers want her to. She presented her thoughts in the homework, not in her language, but in the new language that she learnt at St. Paul's. In her mind, she treats the new language as "bullshit" and does not believe in it. She thinks that there are no fundamental differences between her language and the new language, but just one works much better than the other in the elite world, and that what she learnt and observed at St. Paul's is not how the real world works.

George, a student from a working-class family, shares similar experience with Carla in schoolwork but have the opposite attitude towards what he learnt at St. Paul's. He is the representative of sincere performers. He went through the same transition as Carla, from not doing so well to "get it". Similarly, to achieve this transition, he guessed what teachers wanted in assignments and appealed to their tastes as much as he could. However, he believes that it has nothing to do with "bullshitting" but that he is learning "how things work" and he is getting "how the world works". George is not a single case. He is one of the many middle- and working-class kids at school who think what is taught at school is how the real world operates. They are believers of their own performances, and thus become "sincere performers".

3.3 Front Region and Backstage

No matter which type of performers they are, students at St. Paul's have to learn how to perform as elites. An important part of this performance, being at ease in any social situation, has been discussed. Another significant

component is the display of "work hard", which is closely associated with Weber's work ethic. It can be related to two interesting concepts in Goffman, "front region" and "backstage".

> "A front region refers to the place where the performance is given."
>
> "A back region or backstage may be defined as a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course."

Reay (2017) highlights that while education is often viewed as a mechanism for social mobility, it frequently reinforces existing inequalities by serving middle- and upper-class values, marginalizing working-class students in the process (Reay, 2017). For the students, they also have front region and backstage for their performances of hardworking students. In front of faculty members and other students, they always try to look busy, either studying or being occupied by other extracurricular activities. Almost every conversation that happens on campus would end as a "work talk", discussing how much work they have left to be done. They want to foster an impression that they get into this school through their own diligent work and personal capacity, not through the privilege or inherence from their families. Therefore, students consider any occasions where they are not alone as front regions, and actively perform to leave impression of hardworking on their audiences.

In contrast, dorm room is a backstage where they can remove all masks and take a breath. Students prefer to watch televisions and movies on their computers in their rooms than in common places, partially for the protection of privacy. Another major reason is avoiding faculty and their peers see them not working. Although no one is possibly to work all the time, students hide their relaxing and unproductive moments to the backstage so that at least they seem to be so.

Zooming out, the whole campus life can be a big front region, whereas family is a backstage. In author's description of freshmen's return from home after their first parents' week, almost all student come back looking different, with new apparels, new room decors, new music, or even new everything. These changes result from their observations of students in higher grades who know how to perform as elites better, and how themselves are different from them. We could imagine how they complained about their improper dressing styles, silly room decorations, weird music tastes to their parents, when going back to their backstage (home) from their performance at the front region (school). They make as many adjustments as they can in the backstage, and then return to the front region and continue the performance of elites. Just like actresses in musical shows need to go to backstage for retouches during the intermission. We can see that even just after a short period of time at St. Paul's, students have already started to remake themselves in the most basic and everyday of ways, and embody an elite culture imperceptibly.

3.4 Dramatic Realization

In the first half of the previous section, the paper has discussed how students try to look busy and seem to work all the time in the front region. It is also connected with a concept of dramatic realization, defined by Goffman as follow.

> "For if individual's activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey."

Students could have chosen to be busy in a quieter way, avoiding talking to peers about how much work they need to complete in daily conversations, or just doing work in places where no one can observe. However, they prefer to do the opposite. At St. Paul's, students are always eager to talk about how busy they are and how are they taking control of endless tasks and obligations. This dramatical display of "busyness", through walking around campus, meeting with friends, and going to group meetings, convey the information that they work hard all the time loudly and clearly. Do they really work that hard as they presented? Absolutely no. Based on Khan's description, students barely do any readings for his class, and they rely heavily on summaries and abstract online for class discussion and course assignments. Despite that, by "dramatically" showing off their busyness, students leave the audience an overall impression that they are all hardworking and deserve to be where they are.

3.5 Idealization

The cultivation of new elite culture at St. Paul's is closely related to another key factor, making students believe that they are capable and talented, through daily interactions in various aspects of school life. In this scenario, school and faculty members become performers, and students are their audience. They try hard to convince students that they are extraordinary and are surrounded by other equally talented peers. Even though from the author's point of view, the students are not as excellent as the school want them to believe. There are many examples. When a student played violin in the chapel, another student asked Khan if that student would become an international soloist after graduate. After receiving a negative answer, the student appeared to be skeptical and disappointed. When coaching a top player in the school squash team, the author was asked many times that if that player was going to win Junior Olympics. A student who is good at math in school was believed to get Fields Medal in the future. The author himself, was taken by students as one of the best college squash players in the nation, one of the finest violinists of his generation, and the heir

of a wealthy Muslim dynasty. It is funny that given all those high achievements and honors of the author imagined by students, they are fine with the fact that he is still just a teacher at St. Paul's in the meantime. Obviously, the school has successfully make students believe that the education they received here is exceptional, and everyone around them are all top talents that could contribute to changes in the world. But how does it happen?

The answer is idealization, as defined by Goffman as follow,

> "the tendency for performers to offer their observers an impression that is idealized in several different ways."

The school make full use of every single opportunity to leave students an idealized impression that they are truly amazing and extremely capable. After students' speeches or performances in the chapel, all people would jump to their feet, applause, scream, and give an ovation for how unbelievable it is. It happens every week. In terms of coursework, everyone can get highest honors on some exams in classes throughout the semester. At the end of the school year, the award ceremony takes several hours. Almost every student in the school walks across the stage at least once for achievements, although some of them are actually not that impressive, such as attending all lectures for a class or maintaining all grades above C. Overall, the school makes sure that every student will have the chance to parade in front of the entire school and be showered with applause at least once a year, which creates an illusion that everyone in this community is unique and exceptional.

This idealized impression is reinforced by the frequent appearances of famous people and social elites on campus. They are invited to deliver speeches and sometimes even assist students with coursework. The school have had world-renowned composers to lead songwriting workshops, top scholars to discuss academic theories, award-winning writers and pianists to teach writing and music classes. These resources are unimaginable and impossible for students in non-elite high schools, but something common and handy at St. Paul's. Students are very used to have everything best around them on campus and eventually become indifferent to them. It also explained the fun fact above that yet all the high talents and honors the author has, he remains to be a teacher at St. Paul's.

By rewarding students for every minor achievement and offering top-level educational resources, the school successfully conveyed an idealized impression that no student is normal or ordinary at St. Paul's, and that the quality of their daily experience at school is exceptional. At the same time, the privilege of new elites is developed and cultivated, not based on heritage or wealth but students' own experiences.

4. Work Ethic of New Elites

So far, the paper has analyzed the making of new elites at St. Paul's from several aspects of Goffman's performance theory, and has noted that the display of "hard work" is an indispensable part of the performance. The great value attached to hard work can be traced back to Weber's idea about protestant work ethic in The Protestant Ethic and Spirit of Capitalism (Weber, 1930). He argues that Protestantism redefined the connection between work and piety. In the past, Christian religions rejected mundane affairs, such as economic pursuits. But in Protestantism, especially Calvinism, it supports rational pursuit of economic gain, and stresses the religious duty to make fruitful use of the God-given resources at each individual's disposal. Therefore, hard work and achievements in a secular vocation are considered as expression of piety towards God. This acknowledgement of hard work is believed to be one of the major "elective affinities" associated with the rise of capitalism in the Western world. But why this kind of work ethic is so merited in the making of new elites at St. Paul's that all students want to prove having it?

Friedman and Laurison (2019) introduce the concept of the 'class ceiling,' illustrating how, despite the appearance of meritocracy, individuals from elite backgrounds possess structural advantages in the job market that extend beyond academic achievement (Friedman & Laurison, 2019). This aligns with Rivera (2015), who demonstrates that elite education directly facilitates entry into prestigious careers through the social networks and cultural capital acquired in these institutions (Rivera, 2015). Goffman's theory has been pivotal in understanding the behaviors of elites, particularly through the lens of front stage and back stage performances. Scholars have applied this framework to analyze how social class distinctions are maintained through performative actions, particularly in elite educational settings. Hochschild (1979) extends Goffman's ideas by exploring emotional labor, which is also relevant to the emotional work required of elite students to appear at ease in social situations (Hochschild, 1979).

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The explanation is closely associated with the term "meritocracy, as Khan pointed out,
The notion of social reproduction theory, as put forward by Bowles and Gintis (1976), posits that schools, rather than promoting social mobility, often reproduce the inequalities of the capitalist system (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Elite

schools such as St. Paul's are particularly adept at fostering this reproduction, as their structures privilege those who already possess social and economic capital.

> "it is a form of social engineering, aimed at identifying the talents of members of society so that individuals can be selected for appropriate opportunities."

In a society under the framework of meritocracy, people seem to be no longer valued simply for their family heritage, social ties and status, but for their personal traits, such as hard work, discipline, native intelligence, etc. This fact has been confirmed by the experience of Chase Abbott, a boy who comes from a family that have close connections with St. Paul's and have many ancestors attended this school. Yet he does not become popular or welcomed by other students because of the privileged endowment from his families. Other students are annoyed by the existence of Chase and similar students on campus because their presences make no contribution to any academic work. In other words, they do not work hard, or pretend to be so. Many think that Chase and his peers would not have gotten in here if it weren't their families. But what about themselves? One student, Peter, who complained about Chase, his parents met in Harvard and his families also have strong ties with elite educational institutions. What distinguish Peter with Chase is the understanding of their position at the school. Chase takes it as a birthright; but for Peter, despite that he is also from a privileged family, he thinks how he gets into the school by his own hard work. Peter is not a single case. The majority of students believes that they got into St. Paul's because they work hard. This belief is further strengthened by the idealization of school and faculty members that have been discussed above.

The meritocracy emphasizing hard work and personal traits justifies the persisting inequality in contemporary American society. Following the logic of this system, being successful is not related to wealth and social status, and everyone has equal chance of achieving success if they are diligent and talented enough. It naturalizes socially constituted distinctions, attributes differences in outcomes to individual's innate character, and ignores the role of external forces that has nothing to do with hard work or talent. If it was true that all students who are admitted into St Paul's because of their diligence and talents, why most of them come from rich families, and why other students who are equally or more hardworking and talented did not get in? The answer is obvious and both school and students understand it. But they choose to downplay the influence of wealth and privilege and obscure that fact that success is still well reserved for the privileged, just in a less obvious and seemingly fair form. Meriting diligence and work ethic has become a method to cover persistent inequalities and a perfect excuse for the new elites when being questioned how they achieve success.

5. Vicarious Consumption of Elite Education

In the sections above, the paper has discussed the cultivation of elite performance and the meritocracy system at St. Paul's. Yet the one of the most essential questions, why elite parents would like to send their children to a school like St. Paul's, has not been examined. The answer might be easy, because the school offers the best quality education. Nevertheless, when looking deeply into this question, the situation is more complex. In fact, it vividly elaborates a concept proposed by Veblen in The Theory of Leisure Class (Veblen, 1899), vicarious consumption. Different from conspicuous consumption in which people consume directly for their own interests, in vicarious consumption, individuals consume to show the wealth and status of others.

"The consumption executed by these person (wives, children, servants, retainers, etc.) for their masters or patron represents an investment on his part with a view to an increase of good fame."

> "… decency requires the wife to consume some goods conspicuously for the reputability of the household and its head"

The behavior of rich parents sending children to prestigious boarding schools like St. Paul's can be understood by applying this concept. Undoubtedly, one major reason for parents doing so is out of altruism, hoping that children can receive high quality education and have a promising future. However, it is undeniable that nowadays, parents are competing with each other on which schools their children attend, from kindergarten to college, especially among elite classes. To these people, status and wealth are tickets of entering their social circle and thus everyone has it. As a result, what matters more is the investment on children's education, which reflects family fame and capacity in another way. Having children attending elite schools not only shows that parents are financially capable to afford expensive tuition fee but also displays the possession of rich resources (i.e. human capitals and culture capitals) that are vital to children's admission. Therefore, to some extents, children at elite institutions become vicarious consumers for family reputation and capacity.

Besides showing off parental abilities, attending elite schools help children maintain and reproduce family's elite status. As have been briefly discussed above, there is a shift in the display of elite culture. In the parents' generation, being an elite means have access to exclusive and limited knowledge, tastes and dispositions, whereas in their children's generation, it emphasizes omnivorous attitudes. They listen to classic music but also appreciate hip-hop; they can dress

formally and dine at Michelin restaurants but are also able to wear loose hoodies and buy food from food trucks. Elites become elite because of their openness to the world and the ease that they perform whatever situations they are faced with. The boundaries between elites and non-elites become less and less visible. Elite schools like St Paul's play the important role of cultivating student's acceptance of the increasingly open world and feel at ease at any time. What these schools teach students are no longer exclusive elite knowledge but the ability of moving with ease through a broad range of culture. In other words, rich parents send children to elite schools so that they can receive the most up-to-date training and obtain practical skills for being elite in the contemporary society.

Lareau (2003) highlights that family background significantly influences educational paths, with affluent parents strategically using resources to secure their children's status (Lareau, 2003). Weenink (2008) also suggests that cosmopolitanism has become a form of cultural capital among elite families, aligning with the 'ease' and global awareness that institutions like St. Paul's actively foster in their students (Weenink, 2008).

6. Discussion

To sum up, this paper analyzed the making of new elites at St. Paul's, an example of elite institutions, and the reproduction of social inequalities under the system of meritocracy. Drawing theories from Goffman, Weber and Veblen, the paper interpreted the key aspects of the elite culture cultivation, making students feel at ease in any social situations and fostering an idealized impression that all students are extraordinary. Meanwhile, the paper examined student's elite performance. Even though not all of them are convinced by this performance and some of them are cynical performers, they merit a strong work ethic and display hard work dramatically. In addition, the paper reflected on the question about why rich parents want to their children to attend elite institution, from the perspective of both vicarious consumption and the shift in elite culture from exclusiveness to omnivorousness.

In fact, this shift reinforces the persistent of social inequalities, although the society seems to become fairer and there is no concretely visible boundary between elites and non-elites. The world looks more open and the social hierarchy seems less fixed and more flexible. Everyone has the chance to climb up on the social ladder and achieve social mobility. People who fail to do so would attribute their failures to personal traits, such as did not work hard enough or not were not talented enough. Indeed, elites look increasingly like common people. But it never really makes them become common people, they are just trained to embrace all kinds of cultures and move among them with ease. This ease is so natural and seamless that common people almost forget an important fact, the seemingly natural ease is trained and the access to such training is still highly restricted. As MacLeod (2009) illustrates in his study of working-class youth, the barriers to social mobility are stark for those outside elite systems, highlighting the rigidity of class structures that elite institutions often obscure. This contrasts with the upward mobility narrative perpetuated by elite schools, which often overlooks structural inequalities (MacLeod, 2009).

7. Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on secondary sources, notably Khan's ethnographic account and theoretical interpretations of elite educational practices. This limits the scope of the analysis to Khan's observations at St. Paul's School, which may not fully represent all elite educational institutions. The study's focus on one case limits the generalizability of its conclusions to similar elite schools in other social or cultural contexts.

Moreover, the study does not include primary data, such as interviews or firsthand observations, which could provide richer insights into students' lived experiences and perspectives. Future research could address this gap by incorporating qualitative interviews or focus groups with students and faculty at elite schools to validate or expand on the theoretical interpretations presented here. Additionally, a cross-cultural analysis of elite educational practices could offer comparative insights, allowing researchers to assess whether the findings at St. Paul's align with those of similar institutions globally.

8. Conclusion

This paper illustrates how elite educational institutions, through carefully curated socialization processes and symbolic practices, cultivate a privileged class that appears diverse and meritocratic while perpetuating longstanding social inequalities. By applying sociological theories from Goffman, Weber, and Veblen, the study reveals that practices at institutions like St. Paul's are designed to produce a new elite that navigates social contexts with a cultivated sense of "ease" and embodies values that disguise inherited advantages as personal achievements.

Karabel (2005) provides historical insight into how elite universities, like St. Paul's, shape admissions to maintain a certain type of elite, with meritocratic ideals masking the structural inequalities embedded within these institutions (Karabel, 2005). Elliott and Lemert (2014) situate meritocracy within a broader context of structural inequality, which frames the operations of elite institutions like St. Paul's (Elliott & Lemert, 2014).

Despite the apparent openness and commitment to diversity within these schools, the study finds that social

stratification persists, albeit in a form less visible than in previous generations. By focusing on meritocratic ideals, elite schools shift the emphasis from wealth and heritage to traits like hard work and adaptability, subtly reinforcing the idea that success is purely individual rather than structurally enabled. In doing so, these institutions contribute to a paradox of democratic inequality, where privilege is reproduced under the guise of fairness. Future work could benefit from exploring additional dimensions of elite education, such as the impact of global influences on these institutions and the evolving definitions of merit and success within elite circles.

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