

A Study of Elite Education in Chinese International High Schools

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Abstract. The article examines the meaning of elite and elite education, as well as the characteristics of elite schools in China. Elite schools are institutions that offer education to a small number of predominantly middle or upper-class students. The admissions process for these schools is competitive and costly, resulting in a majority of middle- or upper-class pupils. The schools are also distinguished by the acquisition of cultural capital, a resource that embodies or generates cultural worth. Due to the lack of cultural capital, students from lower socioeconomic origins are excluded from top universities. In addition, the piece discusses the effects of tiny class sizes in top institutions, which are touted as a way to provide each student individualised attention. Yet, the effect of class size on student progress is dependent on instructional strategies. The article claimed that elite education has caused a vicious cycle of increased educational inequality, which has widened the gap between socioeconomic classes.

Keywords: Elite education, International schools, Meritocracy.

1. Introduction

Currently, with the advancement of education, both parents and students place a greater emphasis on education. Elite education is also appearing gradually in the Chinese education system, as more and more people become aware of elite education and more affluent families send their children to international schools. This article examines the concept of elites and elite education, focusing on international high schools in China. The article explores the admission requirements of these schools, which are designed for middle-class students and require substantial financial resources to attend. In addition, the article explores the concept of cultural capital and its influence on student acceptance, as well as the impact of small class sizes in these schools. The article employs Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction to provide a critical analysis of the education system and its influence on students' future prospects and success. Besides, the article indicates the importance of cultural and social background in determining access to elite education by examining the concept of cultural capital. Then, the article emphasises how the small class sizes in these schools allow students to receive more personalised attention and resources, thereby widening the gap between those who can afford to attend these schools and those who cannot. Finally, the essay provides a critical evaluation of elite education and its impact on society. By employing Bourdieu's theory, the article provides a nuanced analysis of the role of cultural and social capital in shaping educational opportunities, thereby shedding light on broader issues of inequality and social justice.

2. Definition of Elite and Elite Education

The term elite is always defined in regard to a certain reference group and a varied number of criteria [1]. Elite schools, which always have the best facilities and students, recruit mostly children of middle and upper class. These pupils are able to receive the greatest possible education because of small class sizes and excellent teaching resources. The middle and upper classes maintain their socioeconomic status through access to elite education, which may also reward them with higher cultural capital in the future [2]. For the middle and upper classes, education was a way to differentiate the commoners and enable their offspring to inherit their cultural capital. As Bourdieu argues in his essay, the education system, which has an effect on cultural capital, makes it difficult for students

from lower socioeconomic categories to acquire an education of a high quality [3]. This is a problem since cultural capital is important. Thus, elite education has expanded the gap between social classes, resulting in a vicious cycle of rising educational inequalities.

3. Characteristics of Elite Schools

3.1. Pre-admission: Tuition Fees and Entrance Examinations

In addition to the ZHONGKAO, students are expected to pass school-administered special examinations, primarily in English. ZHONGKAO is employed in China to pick the top students for high schools, and international high schools usually use a two-tier selection process in order to identify the suitable students. Nonetheless, the growing cost of higher education makes it unattainable for many middle- and upper-class children of working-class families. Notwithstanding official denials of class inequalities in China, these discrepancies continue. Following completing the English and social skills tests, students must next participate in an interview to determine their language proficiency. In addition, the school will want evidence of the family's financial stability and an interview with the child's parents to determine whether or not they can pay tuition. In this case, while selecting students, international high schools analyse not only their academic performance but also their family backgrounds. Students' educational attainment is strongly correlated with the educational level and socioeconomic status of their parents [4]. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are unable to get admission due to the difficult entrance examinations and expensive cost of tuition fee, which has led to the international high schools' reputation as a supplier of elite education. Despite this, many Chinese parents struggle to send their children to international high schools, and many view an elite education at an international high school as a shortcut to higher education. As the Chinese government's tightening policy on public high school options restricts the social elite's ability to send their children to higher education, and as the social elite's high demand for quality educational resources in China converges with global higher education, more parents are opting for international high schools [5].

3.2. Cultural Capital

According to Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction, children from middle- and upper-class families have an academic advantage due to their cultural capital [3]. Cultural capital refers to the non-monetary assets acquired through upbringing, education, and socialisation, such as knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes [6]. Families of the middle and upper classes have the financial means and cultural background to provide their children with an enriched learning environment, which includes exposure to the arts, culture, literature, and music. However, families with a low socioeconomic status may lack the means to provide such an environment, limiting their children's access to cultural capital. This results in a cycle of cultural reproduction in which the advantages of the upper class are passed down through generations while the disadvantages of the lower class are perpetuated.

The lack of cultural capital among students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds can result in feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and a limited grasp of educational concepts [7]. This can also result in decreased academic and workplace productivity. While international high school admissions do not explicitly consider a student's cultural capital, students may be asked about their artistic interests and extracurricular activities during the interview. For instance, if a student mentions learning a musical instrument, he may be required to submit a grade examination certificate for that instrument. Although cultural capital is not a direct factor in the admissions process, it indirectly influences the types of activities and experiences students have had access to, which can influence their performance in the admissions process.

Despite the promise of providing diverse and inclusive education, the cultural capital and family backgrounds of students applying for admission to international high schools can often exclude those from less privileged families. International schools often use English as the medium of instruction for

subjects such as mathematics and physics; this may be difficult for students from low-income families and those who have not received additional English language instruction [8]. Due to the emphasis on testing in the Chinese education system, it may be difficult for students from these locations to get additional English language instruction. Students from less privileged families are frequently excluded from elite institutions, thereby perpetuating the cycle of cultural reproduction and widening the gap between social classes.

3.3. The Effects of Small Class Sizes

Small class sizes are a major selling point for many international schools, which frequently promote the notion that they are devoted to the individual development of each student and that, as a result, each student will receive more teacher attention. While research has demonstrated that class size can be a significant factor in student learning outcomes, the context in which this research was conducted must be considered. Pedder's research revealed, for instance, that student learning ability and teacher teaching ability have a significantly greater direct impact on student achievement than class size [9]. In addition, the effect of class size on student achievement is contingent upon instructional strategies.

However, small class sizes also have certain advantages that cannot be ignored. Large classes provide fewer opportunities for personal interaction than small classes, making it more difficult for teachers to establish and maintain rapport with students, comprehend their needs, interests, backgrounds, and academic progress, and provide individualised forms of support and formative guidance. Therefore, small class sizes may be more conducive to fostering a positive learning environment and giving students the individualised attention, they need to flourish academically.

The use of small class sizes in international high schools in China may exacerbate the education gap between middle- and upper-class students who attend these schools and those who attend traditional Chinese high schools. It is more likely that students in international schools will receive a superior education due to the resources available to these schools, such as small class sizes and highly qualified teachers. Consequently, these students may have a greater chance of gaining access to higher education and higher-paying jobs, thereby widening the gap between socioeconomic classes.

3.4. Meritocracy

In international schools, students are constantly exposed to the concept of meritocracy, either through the school's curriculum or their own sense of self. Meritocracy is founded on the notion that societal positions should be assigned to people based on their talents [10]. This guarantees the long-term survival and flourishing of civilizations. In Breen and Goldthorpe's essay, the meritocratic society is shown as a social stratum. In this society, persons with the capacity to recognise and understand disparities in remuneration and merit are sought out for their talents [11]. In order to give students at the International School the confidence to work hard and excel in all areas, teachers have always given them encouraging feedback. For instance, teachers frequently encourage all students to participate in cultural activities like theatre performances at international schools. However, in the end, performance ability is what counts, and those who can afford additional performance training or who are more talented on their own will be chosen. Thus, it appears that the elite classes of great economic and social prestige are favoured by the meritocratic system. It's impossible to have a meritocracy because people of privilege will constantly want to instill their advantages in their children, whether by monetary means or social prestige [12]. Thus, after one generation, meritocracy closes to newcomers. Superficially, meritocracy is a system that encourages people from various socioeconomic classes to succeed. Meritocracy is, in fact, a philosophy advanced by the wealthy to maintain their privilege, which exacerbates social and economic inequality by giving those from lower socioeconomic levels a decreased chance of acquiring a higher degree.

4. Inequalities between Traditional Chinese High School Students and International High School Students

4.1. Inequities in Access to Higher Education

The GAOKAO is a highly competitive and stressful examination that has been the sole route to higher education for traditional Chinese high school students for decades. As a result, many students in these schools devote the majority of their time to preparing for this exam, ignoring other activities that could contribute to their personal development and growth. Unlike traditional Chinese high schools, international high schools offer a diverse curriculum that includes courses such as A-Level and IB, which provide students with more opportunities to pursue higher education. In addition to prioritising extracurricular activities, these schools offer numerous courses and opportunities for students to participate in sports, music, art, and other activities. This approach to education promotes the holistic development of students and encourages the acquisition of soft skills such as teamwork, leadership, and communication, which are highly valued by top universities around the world.

Moreover, it is important to note that numerous international schools in China provide education from kindergarten through high school. Students from affluent families can enrol in these schools at a young age and receive an elite education that emphasises their personal development and growth. International schools are viewed by many Chinese parents as a way for their children to gain an advantage and win the race to success. These schools provide a stimulating and demanding environment that fosters creativity and a passion for learning. Therefore, international schools in China have become an attractive option for families who place a premium on education and want to give their children the best opportunities for success.

Therefore, international high schools provide a more diverse and enriching education than traditional Chinese high schools, which primarily focus on preparing students for the GAOKAO. These schools provide students with opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities, cultivate soft skills, and pursue higher education at the world's finest universities. Additionally, for families with high socioeconomic status, international schools provide an excellent education that emphasises their children's personal development and growth beginning at a young age.

4.2. Unaware of Elite Education

Unless they attain a higher degree, very few students begin school and obtain an education with the understanding that they are receiving an elite education. Even though they are aware that their education is different from conventional Chinese education, most Chinese students studying abroad are under the impression that they are not getting an elite education and do not understand the notion of elite education. The school didn't come out and say it, but rather gave its pupils the impression that they were destined for greatness. Thus, they consider themselves to be superior to students who attend conventional institutions and think that the education they are receiving would increase their chances of future success [13]. Students who attend prestigious high schools tend to come to agree that meritocracy is a valid selection process, as they come to value the higher education they would get at a top university as a consequence of being admitted into such a programme [12]. As a result, such pupils would be more persuaded that a meritocratic system is justifiable if they were educated according to the model described above. Under this approach, however, students from low-income households would be subject to more restrictions, so aggravating social inequalities. Thus, students who get an elite education may or may not realise that they are obtaining the greatest education possible, but this does not alter the reality that it is unjust to others with lesser socioeconomic status. This is the case even if some students do well in school or in their employment as a direct result of taking such a course.

5. Stereotypes about International Schools

Despite the hefty cost, many families continue to send their children to these premium international high schools as the popularity of studying abroad develops [14]. Elite education is relatively new and uncommon in the context of education in China, and international schools that offer elite education are frequently portrayed negatively in the media. There is a widespread belief among Chinese parents and students that attending an international school can offer an alternative to China's rigorous GAOKAO and a simpler path to higher education.

These beliefs, on the other hand, are only partially accurate because attending a prestigious international school does not guarantee acceptance to a prestigious university. In addition, students must put forth significant effort and perform well in their academic classes. Despite this, a growing number of affluent families are interested in sending their children to international schools, which are frequently regarded as among the most prestigious educational institutions. In addition, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of disseminating accurate information about international schools in order to combat these stereotypes. Because the Internet is not always a reliable source of information, it is essential to have access to accurate and objective information about international schools in order to make informed decisions. Attending an international school can provide many advantages, including exposure to different cultures and languages, a more diverse student body, and the development of a global perspective, all of which can be useful in today's interconnected world [15].

6. Conclusion

When people speak of "elite schools," they refer to institutions that admit only a limited number of middle-class and upper-class students. Students must pass entrance exams, present evidence of their financial means, and display superior social and English communication abilities to get admission to these schools. Students from working-class households are excluded, however, due to exorbitant tuition costs and a tough admissions procedure. Due to their cultural capital, children from middle- and upper-class households are better suited to achieve academic achievement as a result of their elite education. Despite assertions that small class sizes promote individual growth, the influence of class size on student accomplishment is dependent on instructional methods. In elite institutions, the use of small class numbers as a marketing technique worsens educational inequality and reinforces the existing social order.

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