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Private school entry to Oxbridge: how cultural capital counts in the making of elites

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ABSTRACT

In this article we make an argument for the importance of embodied cultural capital in the generation of class advantage through private school students' access to Oxbridge. Private schools in England continue to reproduce advantage (Variyan 2019), however, establishing exactly how students are advantaged through private schooling is not straightforward. Previous studies of educational advantage have drawn on the broad concept of cultural capital (e.g. Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller 2013; Reay, David and Ball 2005) to elucidate processes of inequality. We contend that within this space of Bourdieusian analysis of middle-class advantage there is a need for further thinking about embodied cultural capital as a specific and powerful form working at the symbolic level. By examining a bespoke intervention in a private school in England, we shed new light on *how* students are advantaged when applying to elite universities through processes that facilitate the cultivation of embodied cultural capital.

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Introduction

Despite the fact that they perform no better than state school students in end-of-school examinations (A levels) at the point of university entry, students who attend private schools in the UK gain a disproportionately high number of places at high tariff UK universities. Of those students who obtained A*A*A or higher at A level (where A* is the top grade awarded and including equivalent Scottish qualifications) and were admitted to any UK university in 2019, 73.7% were from state schools and 26.3% from private schools (The University of Oxford 2022). In 2020–2021, just over 6% of children in England attended a private school (DfE (Department for Education) 2021), yet circa 30% of the intake to the elite Universities of Oxford and Cambridge [Oxbridge] were private school students (The University of Oxford 2022; University of Cambridge 2021). This matters because going to Oxbridge impacts future life-chances and opens up the doors to elite positions (Wakeling and Savage 2015). In 2021, 7% of the wider population of Britain had attended private schools, but representation in top professions was disproportionate; for example, 44% of politicians had attended private schools (and 31% were Oxbridge graduates), and 65% of

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senior judges had attended private schools (71% were Oxbridge graduates) (The Sutton Trust and The Social Mobility Commission 2019). Overall, Oxbridge graduates enjoy an advantage on the graduate labour market, while the privately educated maintain an advantage in securing a place at Oxbridge.

Private schools continue to reproduce the advantage they were established to generate (Variyan 2019; Walford 2005, 2012, 2013), however, trying to establish how exactly these students are advantaged through a private school education is not straightforward, and is an area that researchers have been grappling with for some time. Green and Kynaston (2019) conclude that it is down to the resources at the disposal of private schools combined with the social capital that students accumulate whilst at school and are then able to mobilise after leaving. Others have argued that while privately educated young people have higher levels of attainment and an overall advantage in accessing higher education, there is no private school advantage in access to elite universities when controlling for socio-economic status, subjects selected and number of A Levels (Henderson et al. 2019). This suggests that private school advantage in university access may be largely explained by social class and may therefore be connected to the cultural capital conferred by middle-class families (Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003). The significance of cultural capital in educational advantage has been highlighted by many studies (Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Ingram 2018; Reay, David, and Ball 2005; Walkerdine and Lucey 1989) and has included a focus on how elites mobilise cultural capital in graduate employment (Friedman and Laurison 2019; Ingram and Allen 2018). More recently, studies have specifically discussed embodied forms of cultural capital (Friedman and Laurison 2019; Ingram and Allen 2018; Ingram et al. 2023) especially in relation to the graduate labour market and have highlighted the ways in which bodies are read as an expression of seemingly objective characteristics such as competence, knowledge, and skills.

Studies specifically of private schools and elite formation have engaged with wider Bourdieusian literature on capitals and advantage, including some of the literature cited above but have highlighted the significant role of the family in the practices and processes of reproduction (e.g. Davey 2012a Maxwell and Aggleton 2014a; Maxwell and Aggleton 2014b). For example, Davey (2012a) draws on habitus and capitals to examine university decision making processes in a private school, highlighting the ways in which the influence of the family is mediated by the school. In further work, Davey (2012b) argues that private schools themselves are producers of cultural capital, mostly focusing on the display of codes such as engagement in sport and other extra-curricular activities and their conversion into symbolic capital that is used to support decision making around elite university applications. Despite studies demonstrating the advantage for privately educated students in decision making around university applications and acknowledgement of the cultural and social capital advantages of this group, there has been very little attention paid to just how advantage in the process of actually accessing Oxbridge is engendered through the mobilisation of cultural capitals in schools. Moreover, little attention has been given to embodied cultural capital as a specific form in reproducing elites through university application processes.

It is important to develop an understanding of what it is that private schools actually do and how they use their resources to enable students to accumulate and mobilise capital in order to gain an advantage in access to elite universities. Dunne, King, and Ahrens (2014) argue that teachers in private schools endow their students with more social and cultural capital than their state school counterparts, but the study stops short of showing how this

capital is produced and then mobilised. To address the inequalities between private and state education, however, it is necessary to not only explore what is produced, but how this production happens (Watkins 2018). This paper will examine one private school preparation programme [the Open Doors Programme] in detail to illuminate the ways in which advantage is conferred to students. It provides an original focus on the cultivation of Bourdieu's (1986) three forms of cultural capital through the practices within private schools. This offers an important and needed shift in emphasis from the outcome of private educational advantage to a focus on the mechanisms that generate and cement the advantages that are enjoyed.

Background

Students in England apply to university through UCAS (The Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). The UCAS application includes a personal statement in addition to information about the student's academic background; the personal statement is an opportunity for applicants to explain and demonstrate how they stand out above other applicants. The admissions process for elite universities and more competitive courses (for example, medicine and dentistry) not only involves the UCAS application, but is also likely to involve interviews and admissions tests, most prevalent for Oxbridge. The performance in these tests and interviews determines which of the students, who are predicted top grades at A level, will be offered places by these universities. Students will receive varying levels of support from their school to help them to prepare for the admissions process. However, private schools are particularly adept in preparing their students for the admissions process at elite universities, including support with writing personal statements (Jones 2012), advice about which college to apply to at Oxbridge (Ye and Nylander 2015; Zimdars, Sullivan, and Heath 2009), sessions on the application process (Donnelly 2014), interview preparation support and cultivation of skills (Warikoo and Fuhr 2014).

The study and context

The school

The focus is on a private school in the context of England at a time when university access has expanded, and higher education is accessible to a greater number of students from working-class backgrounds. Historically private schools in England operated as funnels for an elite university system but as the higher education system has diversified and access has expanded to those from across the secondary school sector the competition for places at Oxbridge and other high tariff universities has increased. Private schools continue to be associated with privilege and elitism, but this diverse sector includes highly selective schools, preparatory schools, faith-based schools, boys' schools, girls' schools, independent day schools, public boarding schools and schools which cater for children with specific learning difficulties with some much more well-resourced than others (Walford 2005, 2012).

At the heart of this study is a private school in the North of England with an established history of sending students to Oxbridge, a pattern it wishes to maintain despite increased competition. The school could be classed as elite given its considerable success in end of year exams, prestigious university entrance and excellent reputation (Kenway and Fahey

2014, 2015). It is important to note that not all private schools in England are homogenous and there are differences in terms of wealth and status. In relation to the financially differentiated hierarchy of private schools in England, day schools, such as the one in question, in the north of the country, are at the lower end of the economic field and reflect the uneven geography of capital in England (Gamsu 2022). This '*space, time, materiality, and context* and their tangled expressions' (Koh and Kenway 2016) are important considerations for situating this study within the framework of a multiply stratified education system.

The Open Doors Programme

This study explores the capital that teachers cultivate and embed in their students in order to give them an advantage in the university admission process. It examines the Open Doors Programme in a private boys' 11–18 grammar school in the North of England which has success getting students into high tariff universities.

The Programme is a bespoke school-based intervention that aims to prepare students for application to and study at high tariff universities. It was introduced in 2012 to replace previously entitled 'Oxbridge lessons'. There was an awareness in the school that getting top grades is not enough to secure a place at an elite university, so the Open Doors Programme was put in place to give advantage in the admissions process and enable mobilisation of capital through specific activities. The Open Doors Programme was offered in each discrete subject, such as French or Chemistry etc., as well as medicine and ethics. It was taught primarily after school with some lunch time sessions. All students were free to choose to attend the Programme sessions in the subject they wished to study at university, or alternatively they may choose to attend other sessions offered as part of the larger enrichment programme to fill the enrichment blocks on their timetable. Students who were applying for competitive courses (e.g. medicine) and/or to high tariff universities were encouraged to opt-in to the Programme sessions. The sessions ran from midway through the penultimate school year until midway through the final school year, which coincided with when admissions tests and interviews for Oxbridge took place; the only exception to this was mathematics, for which the sessions ran until the end of the final school year. This was designed to align with Sixth Term Examination Papers (STEP), which are required for entry to the Universities of Cambridge and Warwick; both considered to be elite universities for mathematics.

Methodology and methods

Our methodological approaches are interpretivist underpinned by a subjectivist ontology through which we attempt to understand how and why things happen. By focusing on one programme in one particular school, and taking a case study approach, our findings are 'highly context and case dependent' (Patton 2002, 563), but by focusing on one school, we are able to understand the complexity of the processes in generating the unequal patterns that are already known. The research has enabled us to explicate both the explicit and subtle mechanisms involved in cultural capital development. These processes are likely replicated in other guises at other private schools and it, therefore, provides the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of embodied cultural capital (re)production of elites.

The use of Bourdieu's tools enabled us to understand what is happening in the Programme in terms of transformation and transmission of capital. Although the participants did not use the term capital, the way they described things showed that they thought they were of value, i.e. capital. An interpretivist approach helps us to try to understand how and why things are happening, whilst acknowledging that we all see the education system in a different way. We aim to reveal the arbitrary nature of power that is hidden in capital, challenge the orthodoxy and open up the field of opinion in search of the truth of the doxa and its cultural arbitrary. By drawing on Bourdieu's tools and ideas of capital, habitus and field, we have been able to develop an understanding of what might be going on in the Programme. Bourdieu's tools allow the local orthodoxy to be exposed as misrecognition.

At the time of data collection (2013–2014), twenty teachers delivered the Programme, of these seventeen opted to take part in the research. In most subjects there was only one, occasionally two teachers of the Programme; to protect participants' anonymity, the subjects have been categorised into sciences, humanities, languages, and social sciences. Nearly half of the teacher participants had attended a private school themselves, and two thirds had gone on to study at a high tariff university, with half of these studying at Oxbridge. Just under half had a master's degree or doctorate in their subject; the academic background of the participants comes with associated capital which informs the activities and teaching and learning approaches used in the Open Doors Programme.

While there were no explicit published aims for the sessions, they were described as preparing candidates for 'selective' (i.e. elite) universities, and teacher autonomy over the content and delivery meant that this was open to interpretation. Therefore, it was necessary to ascertain what the teachers believed the Programme aims were and how they achieved these. To do this, all teachers were given a reflective writing task (May–June 2014) in which they were asked to write a paragraph, or more if they wished, reflecting on some or all of the following points:

- What do you do in the sessions which is different to within normal lessons or beyond A-level teaching?
- What do you think the purpose(s) of these sessions is/are?
- How do you think you achieve this purpose or purposes?
- You may wish to give an example of a typical session or an example to illustrate how you think you have achieved this purpose.

Initially open coding was used for the reflective writing tasks (Denscombe 2003). This identified four distinct themes: content of the sessions, skills taught, teaching and learning approaches, and preparation the application process and study at university. These descriptors were then used to frame the observation schedule. Three teachers volunteered for lesson observations (September–December 2014) and interviews (October 2014 – January 2015) (three teachers were also interviewed as part of the pilot study). There were questions common to all interviews, e.g.

- How do you decide what to do in the sessions? How do you decide the content of the sessions? Is this based on publicly available guidance from the university? Otherwise, where have you obtained this knowledge/guidance/ideas (experience, spending time with academics etc.)?

- Do you think these sessions advantage the students when applying to elite universities? How do you think these sessions help students get offers from elite universities?
- Do these sessions meet any other needs which we haven't already discussed?

However, there were questions unique to each participant which followed up points from the reflective writing task and observation, e.g.:

- In what other ways [in addition to having 'anecdotes'] can students stand out in interviews?
- Why do you think 'thinking on their feet' is a skill students need? Are there other ways you might ask the students to 'think on their feet'?
- How do you know what universities want to see?

The interviews, each approximately an hour long, were conducted face-to-face on the school site after the end of the school day and were audio-recorded then transcribed.

The analytical approach to the data was Bourdieusian, working with the concept of capitals and informed by the literature on educational inequalities. Using this approach, we initially coded for Bourdieu's three main forms of capital: economic, social and cultural. During this process cultural capital emerged as a dominant form in our coding of capitals and this prompted us to develop a further analysis of different forms of cultural capital and to delineate objectified, institutionalised and embodied cultural capital, again following Bourdieu's conceptualisation. These three forms of cultural capital form the basis of the analysis that is to follow.

The participants

Each participant had created a package of activities for the Programme in order to meet what they perceived to be the overall aims. They each came with their own personal histories and experiences of state/private education and types of universities. We provide a summary of the background of the three participants who were observed and interviewed.

Charlotte teaches sciences and is in the early stages of her teaching career. She herself had a state education and applied to Oxbridge but did not receive an offer of a place. She went on to study at another high tariff university. She holds no postgraduate qualifications other than a postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE).

Francis teaches humanities and is an established teacher in the school. He describes his own secondary school as a 'bog standard state school, which was regularly last in [the local authority's] league table' and which was 'almost exclusively working class and had very very few middle-class students'. Subsequently, Francis attended a sixth form college where one of his teachers, himself an Oxbridge graduate, encouraged Francis to apply to Oxbridge within his first month of being there. Francis was successful in gaining a place at Oxbridge. He completed a master's degree at another elite university before returning to Oxbridge to do his PGCE. Francis has written an A level textbook and taught on an undergraduate course in his subject at an elite university.

Matthew teaches languages and is in the early stages of his teaching career. He had a private education and studied at Oxbridge. He completed a master's degree at an elite university in a different subject to the one he teaches on the Programme.

Each of the participants had first-hand experience of Oxbridge interviews as well as professional experience through guiding cohorts of students through the application process. In what follows we analyse their perceptions and actions in their attempts to make a new generation of Oxbridge elites.

Making elites: the cultivation and enhancement of cultural capital

We will show how the students acquire and enhance different forms of cultural capital, which ultimately confers advantage in the Oxbridge admissions process. Utilising Bourdieu's game analogy, we discuss the tactical advantages that are conferred through the transmission of the feel for the game, exploring the ways in which objectified and embodied forms of cultural capital operate to further enhance performance. Bourdieu defines cultural capital in the following way:

Cultural capital can exist in three forms: in the embodied state, i.e. in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body; in the objectified state, in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines, etc.), which are the trace or realization of theories or critiques of these theories, problematics, etc.; and in the institutionalized state, a form of objectification which must be set apart because, as will be seen in the case of educational qualifications, it confers entirely original properties on the cultural capital which it is presumed to guarantee. (Bourdieu 1986, 243)

These three forms of cultural capital proposed by Bourdieu are important to the analysis in this article. The school chooses to deploy its resources (teachers and lesson time) to facilitate the Programme, providing a time and means for the teachers to build and enhance capital. Fundamental to this was the freedom the teachers were given to choose what the curriculum would be for these sessions. Their chosen activities included opportunities for students to develop skills (such as research, adaptability and thinking under pressure), develop knowledge (including meta-knowledge) and conscious preparation for interviews for elite universities. The teachers of the Programme have a 'feel for the game' of what the powerful knowledge/skills/capital are that will give students a tactical advantage in the admissions game. The way in which these forms of cultural capital are acquired or reinforced is explored in the following sections through an examination of each of Bourdieu's three forms of cultural capital. We begin with a short examination of objectified and institutionalised cultural capital in turn, before turning our attention to embodied cultural capital. We pay particular attention to embodied cultural capital as this form is less tangible than the other two and therefore operates powerfully through processes that construct its value as objective and misrecognise its arbitrary construction.

Objectified cultural capital

Objectified cultural capital exists 'in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines etc.)' (Bourdieu 1986, 243). Teachers transmit objectified cultural capital, in the form of knowledge, to ensure that their students acquire 'knowledge and understanding beyond typical sixth form level' (William), 'deeper' knowledge than A level (Luke) and knowledge that 'broadens' understanding (Martin), and 'stretches [the students'] thinking' (Matthew).

In the Programme, we see objectified cultural capital, in the form of specific artefacts (texts) informed by the teachers' capital, that carry symbolic value: Matthew used the sessions to provide a time for the students to study a particular poem because 'it's on the undergraduate reading list for a lot of the top universities'; Rebecca got students to read 'seminal texts' not covered on the A level syllabus; Charlotte spoke of a seminal journal article that she explored with students; John gave students 'new or appropriate reading' as well as getting them to 'research and prepare talks on contemporary topics for delivery to their peers'. The teachers use the Programme sessions to provide time for students to read and research, ensuring that they have the time to invest to acquire this objectified cultural capital; the teachers are training their students ready for the admissions game. This is one way in which we see the commodification of knowledge happening to facilitate tactical advantage. The teachers selected seminal texts for their students to read and used the sessions to furnish their students with additional knowledge: knowledge of the existence of these texts, and knowledge and understanding of the content of these texts.

Institutionalised cultural capital

The institutionalised form of cultural capital relates to both the institution of the private school which confers its own advantage through membership, and the underlying assumptions of merit and prestige that attach themselves to individuals quite simply because of association. Private schools are historically 'market institutions, selling a commodity, namely education' in a marketplace that is about 'money and prestige' (Joyce 2013, 265–266). The anticipated qualifications that the young people are expected to acquire are also wrapped into this form of capital. Each Oxbridge applicant from a private school carries with them both the weight of institution and the value of the educational credentials they are on track to receive, and this provides an overarching form of cultural capital.

Some teachers talked of a 'tension' between enhancing knowledge and enhancing performance in Oxbridge admissions processes. Although Matthew identifies that, at least, part of the purpose of the sessions is 'preparing [the students] for the possible interview process', he justifies this as preparing students for study of the subject at university level. Like Matthew, Martin identifies the same conflict in the Programme's purpose and Charlotte attempts to justify the Oxbridge preparation:

Martin: The purpose of the sessions is twofold: (a) It is intended to broaden the understanding of those who are interested in [the subject] ... (b) To demonstrate that the school is doing something for those students who hope to go to Oxford or Cambridge. Despite its name, the sessions are clearly meant to be targeted at Oxbridge candidates, as so few other leading universities interview for [subject] places.

Charlotte: I believe the purpose is to develop wider interest within the subject, to challenge the boys and to stimulate them. It is also to develop enquiry skills and enable them to have interesting anecdotes needed to make them 'stand out' during Oxbridge/medic interviews.

These comments suggest that there is an institutional misrecognition that sessions are aiming to prepare students for a wider range of top universities rather than just Oxbridge. Martin's comments indicate that he sees the development of institutionalised cultural capital in the form of knowledge that will be transferred into qualifications as the main purpose

of the Programme, but he also highlights that this knowledge can be packaged for performance in an Oxbridge interview.

Bourdieu's conceptual analogy of a 'feel for the game' is useful in considering the 'purposes' of developing knowledge and interview performance. We can conceive of the Oxbridge admission preparation process at work here as an example of a Bourdieusian 'game'. Bourdieu (1990, 64) argues that 'whomever wants to win this game... must have a feel for the game, that is, a feel for the necessity and the logic of the game'. Both institutionalised and objectified forms of cultural capital are important in the admissions game. The examples above are indicative of teachers' feel for the Oxbridge admissions game and their tacit understanding of how they can transfer this to their students. Knowledge can be seen as an objective criterion for success, but as has been shown, the acquisition of valuable additional knowledge is something that private schools offer to secure advantage for their students. Knowledge, however, is not enough in the Oxbridge admissions process as all students who are invited for interview will have demonstrated institutionalised and objectified forms of cultural capital through previous and predicted exam success. Another form of cultural capital that comes into play and is key in generating distinction among similarly qualified candidates is embodied cultural capital, to which we now turn.

Embodied cultural capital

Cultural capital in the embodied state takes 'the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (Bourdieu 1986, 243). As such embodied cultural capital is an affective expression of habitus that powerfully signals one's place in the world. The teachers on the Programme stated aims to develop certain skills: thinking under pressure, problem-solving, discussion and debate, adaptability/flexibility, and interview technique. All of these skills go beyond the institutionalised and objectified forms of cultural capital that all Oxbridge interview candidates would be expected to have. They are embodied in the sense that they entail a somatic response to external stimuli, for example, developing the ability to think under pressure involves bodily reaction to the source of pressure. Teachers included activities in the Programme sessions that operated to enable the development of these skills which effectively worked to shape the students' embodied cultural capital and give them a competitive edge in the admissions game.

Embodied cultural capital – habitus-field alignment and performing with ease

This phrase, ['feel for the game']... gives a fairly accurate idea of the almost miraculous encounter between the habitus and a field, between incorporated history and an objectified history... [it] is what gives the game a subjective sense – a meaning and a *raison d'être*, but also a direction, an orientation, an impending outcome, for those who take part and therefore acknowledge what is at stake. (Bourdieu 1990, 66)

Bourdieu draws attention to the way that having a feel for the game involves an orientation rather than an explicit calculation about action and emphasises the 'miraculous' alignment between habitus and field which engenders a smooth choreography of action. The teachers facilitate this choreography through passing forms of cultural capital to their students in order to enhance their feel for the game. Teachers are not seeing how this preparation becomes part of the student's habitus and the cultural capital that then provides power in

the interview due to an alignment of habitus and field. In a similar way to how Lareau and Weininger (2003) found that middle-class parents ‘trained’ their children with activities which transmitted capital to their children, it was apparent that the teachers on the Programme ‘trained’ their students with activities that transmitted cultural capital. They are effectively being inculcated in playing the game.

One example of this is William stating:

The aim of these sessions has been to engage students in doing their own research to solve problems set. I have also tried to develop students’ presentation skills by having them chair discussions or present their answers. In these sessions I have stretched the students by asking follow-up questions to make them think on their feet.’

While this could be read as the cultivation of the objectified form of cultural capital in the students (through the development of useful skills), it may also be considered as the generation of long-lasting ways of being and acting through the development/reinforcement of enduring forms of embodied cultural capital. The activities develop confidence not only about knowledge content but in ways of performing and expressing ideas and information. In this way knowledge becomes worn on the body, and confidence in its expression becomes misrecognised as knowledge itself. William later posits that ‘The purpose [of the activities he develops for the Programme] is to try to replicate a university tutorial environment. This should give students valuable preparation for potential interviews and should also give them a flavour of what it may be like to study [the subject] at university.’ Again, we see the subtle but powerful ways in which the students are being supported to cultivate ways of being that will be recognised and valued in the Oxbridge interviews. By taking the field that students will encounter during the admissions interviews and replicating this in the Programme sessions, William is supporting the students to develop the ‘right’ embodied cultural capital and a sense of ease with an Oxbridge environment. This promotes an alignment between the students’ habitus and the interview field, which in turn facilitates an ease of performance, which is more likely to be read/misrecognised as valuable by interviewers.

Other teachers engage in similar activities that operate to align students’ habitus and the Oxbridge university field through the development of embodied cultural capital. Luke, for example, also attempts to replicate the interview process in his sessions: ‘Typical sessions involve a short lecture with Q&A about the topic, followed by a group activity/debate or discussion similar to a TA-led session at university.’ In his sessions he aims to develop objectified cultural capital in the students by giving ‘students a bit more “ammunition” in their interviews’. However, the way in which he cultivates homologies between the private school and Oxbridge field helps to transform objectified cultural capital into embodied cultural capital, providing students with a sense of fit and ease in responding to the demands of an interview that is set to determine whether students have what it takes to thrive in the Oxbridge environment.

Several teachers mention thinking under pressure as a skill they develop through the Programme. Although this is a form of objectified cultural capital, we see how the teachers provide opportunities for it to become embodied through the experiences they provide which replicate the admissions process. For example, Philip writes: ‘The pupils say that the best interview prep they had was me asking them hard questions in the sessions: putting them “on the spot” and making them “grind out” an acceptable answer’. Students being ‘put on the spot’ and ‘thinking under pressure’ was exemplified in all three lesson observations.

In the observed session, Charlotte gave her students the ‘Magic Sack’ activity where there are several objects in a bag and the applicant is asked to identify the odd one out. This is similar to Charlotte’s experience in her own Oxbridge interview and based on an activity her colleagues had been ‘doing before [she] came along’ (Charlotte). Charlotte described the activity in her observed lesson before giving the students a similar activity:

I interviewed at Oxbridge. And at one of them, it was horrible, they had three different objects and they asked: which was the odd one out. But they could all have been the odd one out. I’ll never forget, it was: a potato, an apple and an onion. And I got completely undone on the sodding onion, because I didn’t know anything about it at all, apart from it had layers, a bit like Shrek... I thought we’d do something similar. But, basically, [the PowerPoint is] going to come up with a random object. And, in pairs or groups, I want you to: ‘What would you say about [this]?’ Rather than ‘What’s the odd one out?’, ‘What would you say about this?’ If you got given: ‘Tell me something about this, what would you say about it? What could you reply? And it’ll be interesting to find out how we all approach it from completely different angles... I’ll give you two minutes.

Charlotte draws on her own Oxbridge interview experience, for which she describes her own preparation as ‘none’ and ‘minimal’, to give her students experience of a ‘well-known thing that they do in Oxbridge interviews’ (Charlotte). Charlotte uses this activity to put the students on the spot. She puts them under pressure to say something ‘interesting’ about a random object. This activity allows students to experience thinking under pressure, but additionally it gives them practice at a potential interview approach. Charlotte expects an, almost, immediate response to her question, a skill also looked for in interviews where applicants are expected to answer questions with very little, if any, thinking time. This specifically chosen activity equips students for interview in the following ways: developing the skill of thinking under pressure; exposure to a potential interview activity, which develops familiarity. Through these activities the students develop embodied ways of performing and displaying their worthiness of a place at Oxbridge.

Other teachers also give the students experiences in the Programme sessions which put them under pressure including the use of ‘known’ interview activities. For example, Francis was observed using role play scenarios and Matthew using ‘blind poems’ (those not seen before), drawing on their own capital to inform the Programme activities. Through experiencing this in the sessions, the students are more used to it, than their competitors may be, when they are being interviewed in the admissions game; their habitus will be better aligned with the interview field. Furthermore, the use of known interview activities not only develop students’ ability to think under pressure but facilitate familiarity and ease with the interview situation. In other words, students cultivate powerful forms of embodied cultural capital that are attuned to the field of the Oxbridge admissions game. From a Bourdieusian perspective the incorporation of skills in the ‘embodied state’ is a form of cultural capital if they empower the bearer (Bourdieu 1986). Moreover, they operate all the more powerfully when all actors involved in the game do not perceive the arbitrariness of both the construction of capital and the value that comes to be attached to it. As Bourdieu argues:

Symbolic – that is, conventional and unconditional – stimulations, which act only on condition they encounter agents conditioned to perceive them tend to impose themselves unconditionally and necessarily when inculcation of the arbitrary abolishes the arbitrariness of both the inculcation and the significations inculcated. (Bourdieu 1977, 76)

The embodied cultural capital expected of the Oxbridge interview is not recognised as privilege by those involved, rather it entails a process of ‘social magic’ (Ingram and Allen 2018) where this privilege is transformed into signifying objective (and meritocratically gained) skills. In other words, ease of performance becomes magically transformed into evidence of knowledge and skills through processes of misrecognition. Ingram and Allen (2018, 729) argue in relation to graduate recruitment that the process of social magic ‘casts a magical veil so that embodied forms of cultural capital become naturalised and the structures in which they were generated are denied existence.’ In the case of our study, we can see this at work through the misrecognition of the cultural arbitrary leading to an almost magical alignment between seemingly objective qualities and bodily performance.

Embodied cultural capital – showing ‘that they can think’

Whilst displaying knowledge and skills can be regarded as important for university entry, the discourses surrounding expectations for success in Oxbridge interviews suggest that they alone are not enough; additionally, it is important for candidates to ‘show that they can think’ in an Oxbridge environment ‘in which arrested development could masquerade as wit and intellectual brilliance’ (Joyce 2013, 301). Matthew evidences this perception through his communications with Oxbridge tutors:

I’ve spoken to various tutors and one thing that they’re very very keen for is that again as I was saying before that the boys are not just prepared to kind of have this kind of discrete packet of data that they can show they know but they’re able to show that they can think.

This raises the question of what it looks like to show that one can think, and it is interesting that the focus is on ‘showing’ that one can think rather than on ‘thinking’ itself. ‘Showing’ implies a performance and this is most likely to be demonstrated through a bodily display of cultural capital. In the previous section we discussed how students are supported to develop an ease of performance through acclimatising them to the sorts of activities that may form part of the Oxbridge interviews, as well as through getting used to performing and thinking quickly and under pressure. We now turn our attention to the sorts of value-added embodied cultural capital cultivation activities that teachers engage in that may contribute to ‘showing’ that students can think. It is our contention that this display of ‘thinking’ through embodied cultural capital is an example of what Bourdieu describes as the imposition of the ‘cultural arbitrary’ (Bourdieu 1977). He argues that ‘Every established order tends to produce the naturalisation of its own arbitrariness’ (Bourdieu 1977, 115). In the case of ‘showing thinking’ we can see how the embodied cultural capital of the privately educated student becomes legitimated through its arbitrary misrecognition as thinking per se. The established order of the elite education space of Oxbridge finds homology with the elite education space of the private school and they share a symbolic recognition of the same arbitrary forms of culture without recognising their arbitrariness. This process ensures the continued reproduction of the dominance of those born to the elite. As Moore (2004, 448) argues, ‘Power valorizes culture and culture performs the service of disguising and legitimating power.’

Several teachers provided examples of how they cultivated ‘showing thinking’. Matthew focussed his attention on literature with an emphasis not on reading significant numbers of books but on the bodily display of thinking about the books. For him it is important to inculcate the capacity to perform intelligence in a way that goes beyond evidencing the

knowledge from the curriculum. He says that it is important that candidates are able ‘to comment intelligently. So, if they’ve read three works and can comment beautifully, intelligently on the points that are being made eloquently, clearly, then you know that’s infinitely better than someone who’s read thirty books and doesn’t understand them.’

Charlotte echoes Matthew’s perceptions of the value of embodied forms of cultural capital over objectified cultural capital within the Oxbridge interview. ‘They [Oxbridge interview panel members] are looking for people who have a wider knowledge, a wider understanding, confidence to talk about topics.’ Although Charlotte recognises that having objectified cultural capital (knowledge) is important, she also emphasises the significant role of confidence, which is something that is performed through the body. She goes on to further discuss confidence and to draw a link between it and communication:

We don’t care what the answer is, but how are you getting there and to be able to have the confidence to say ‘Well if this is this...’ And actually, kind of like orally communicating how they’re getting from A to B. And it doesn’t matter what B is, just how are they getting there.

Confidence and communication are both embodied performances and as such can convey value or lack thereof. We hypothesise that there may be a link between this embodied confidence in performing thinking and what Jerrim, Parker, and Shure (2019) described as ‘bullshitting’, as ‘bullshitters were more likely to express confidence in their skills even when they were of equal academic ability (McBain 2019, 14). Of particular note in this research is Jerrim, Parker and Shure’s (2019, 17) findings that ‘young men are more likely to bullshit than young women, and that bullshitting is somewhat more prevalent amongst those from more advantaged socioeconomic backgrounds.’ The interviews at Oxbridge are a means of assessing a candidate’s fit through their performance and the intensive embodied cultural capital training offered through the Programme facilitates the reproduction, cultivation and refinement of a habitus attuned to institutional expectations. The University of Oxford website (2023) highlights their focus on assessing this fit in its advice to prospective applicants. In a section with the heading ‘Why do we interview?’ they state: ‘A good deal of the teaching at Oxford takes place in small classes or tutorials, and your interviewers – who may be your future tutors – are assessing your ability to study, think and learn in this way.’

It is not just the ability to think that is being assessed but being able to show that one can perform that thinking in a way that is befitting of an Oxford tutorial. It is interesting to consider this alongside the Programme approaches of Charlotte and Matthew. They both demonstrate a tacit recognition of the deeply ingrained importance of embodied cultural capital in the decision making about who can study and think in the Oxbridge way. The University of Oxford (2023), however, point out that: ‘Decisions are *not based on your manners, appearance or background*, but on your ability to think independently and to engage with new ideas beyond the scope of your school or college syllabus’ (Our emphasis).

In this we see a defence against accusations of elitism in the Oxbridge interview process, which is a common accusation levied against the universities through media and popular discourse based on the over-representation of privately educated students. It is our contention in this paper that manners, appearance, and background are not separable from performance of thinking independently and engaging in new ideas. Indeed, the former is the embodiment of the latter.

Conclusion

Private schools have resources at their disposal, which enable them to give their students an advantage (Gamsu 2022; Green and Kynaston 2019). In this paper we have shown how one private school deployed its resources, in this case, teachers and time to contribute to the reproduction of social inequality in education. Through a specifically devised programme, teachers have a means to cultivate cultural capital that gives their students a tactical advantage in the admissions game. The teachers draw on their own social and cultural capital to inform what they do in the sessions and cultivate capital in their students through specifically chosen activities. Most teachers in this study had graduated from an elite university and several had postgraduate qualifications in their subject; this provides access to capital. There are not many teachers who are Oxbridge graduates or who have higher degrees and many of these teach in private schools. The alignment between the teachers' dispositions and orientations (*habitus*) and those expected from the field of elite higher education position them as the bearers and facilitators of the sorts of capitals the students need to demonstrate in order to be recognised in the Oxbridge interview process.

In the Programme, the teachers package desirable skills and knowledge which will help their students to stand out in this game. The teachers maximise institutionalised cultural capital through deepening their students' knowledge of their subject and packaging this knowledge for performance in Oxbridge interviews. The cultural capital also takes the form of objectified cultural capital and embodied cultural capital. The objectified cultural capital took the form of knowledge, beyond sixth form level, of specific books and journal articles that the teachers used the Programme sessions to ensure their students read. The acquisition of additional knowledge is powerful as it secures an advantage for applicants in the Oxbridge admissions process. Through the inculcation of cultural capital, the teachers make their students 'game ready' by giving them a tactical advantage over other applicants. For example, applicants who read around a subject and research areas of interest or importance are likely to be desirable to university admissions tutors. There is, perhaps, a presumption amongst the teachers that any applicant could do extra reading or research into the subject and so by facilitating reading and research for their students they do not see that they are providing a tactical advantage in the admissions game, but rather buy into the idea of a meritocracy that anyone who works hard enough can achieve success (Littler 2018).

Furthermore, we have shown that having knowledge is not enough. This paper's main contribution to knowledge is the examination of embodied cultural capital which is harder to identify due to its intrinsic link with one's *habitus*. The following skills are embodied cultural capital that the teachers aimed to develop: thinking under pressure, problem solving, discussion and adaptability. The teachers included activities that would develop these skills in their students to provide them with an advantage. Applicants need to demonstrate that 'they can think' and 'perform' under pressure. We have shown how teachers cultivate 'showing thinking' in their students. This performance of 'showing thinking' is misrecognised and thus legitimised as thinking itself. The embodied cultural capital enables the students to better align their *habitus* with the admissions field and provides them with a sense of ease performing in the Oxbridge interview environment.

Bourdieu notes that 'The accumulation of cultural capital...costs time, time which must be invested personally by the investor' (Bourdieu 1986, 245); the Programme provides the time for the students to accumulate cultural capital and for certain capital to become

embodied through the activities chosen by the teachers. The students' investment of time is rewarded through the activities of the Programme that cultivates and hones their cultural capital. By allowing time within the timetable for the teachers to develop deeper knowledge in their students, the Programme ensures that symbolically recognised cultural capital becomes deeply embedded as a taken-for-granted way of being and performing (Bourdieu 1977). Embodied cultural capital operates all the more powerfully by being misrecognised as a display of meritocratically achieved knowledge rather than as 'manners, appearance or background' (University of Oxford 2023).

Through its focus on the significance of embodied cultural capital this article challenges assumptions by those involved in admissions processes that they are operating with objectivity. Universities that sort applicants through an interview process need to go beyond stating that decisions are not based on manners, appearance or background and to challenge the unconscious biases that may inhere in how judgements of knowledge and competence are formed by those conducting interviews. It is timely for elite universities to interrogate their own practices on a micro level when all evidence suggests that at the institutional level they are failing to achieve equity in admissions. Training in the complexities of embodied cultural capital and elite advantage should be a component of unconscious bias training for university admissions' staff, including the academics involved. At the same time, we would resist the urge for policymakers to conclude from our arguments that disadvantaged schools need to adopt the same approaches as private schools in order to make their students compete on a more even playing field. The recognition of the embodied cultural capital of the elite is a problem that requires challenge. This challenge requires rethinking the misrecognition of other forms of embodied cultural capital rather than supporting disadvantaged schools to replicate elite embodied cultural capital.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Ethical approval

The University of Manchester, Manchester Institute of Education Research Integrity Committee approved the research.

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