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A designed 'lack of design': how autonomy enables the mobilisation of capital at elite schools

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ABSTRACT

There has been a recent burgeoning of interest in the power of elite private schools in the UK. However, little attention has been paid to the propulsive power of the mechanisms in place within such schools that enable and support the mobilisation of valued forms of cultural capital such as 'ease'. Here, we draw upon unprecedented access to two elite private boys' secondary schools in England to show how what we conceptualise as a designed 'lack of design' within the elite school curriculum contributes to the formation of an elite habitus which is valued in the context of recruitment to elite higher educational and professional institutions. Ultimately, we argue that the practices described are misrecognised by stakeholders as taking place within an autonomous system, when this so-called autonomy or independence is very much informed by the signifiers of distinction upon which these schools sell themselves.

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Elite education; sociology of elites; education inequality; cultural capital; privilege; ease

Introduction

It is no secret that private education in the UK has significant propulsive power. Indeed, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that those who have attended such schools are more likely to go on to hold positions of power and influence in society.¹ Furthermore, research by Reeves and Friedman (2024), using the wealth of data provided by *Who's Who?*² shows us how those who have had the privilege of attending an elite school in the UK continue to dominate elite fields and professions. Such privilege similarly translates into economic gains, where again we know that it almost certainly 'pays to be privileged' (Friedman and Laurison 2019).

This enduring influence of elite schooling has sparked a subsequent burgeoning of interest among scholars seeking to understand its wider implications. Recent research has delved into the sociological dimensions of elites, class privilege and educational advantage in North America (Gaztambide-Fernández 2009; Howard 2008; Howard and Gaztambide-Fernandez 2010; Khan 2011). Additionally, important contributions have been

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made in the UK, particularly in the context of girls' schools (Allan 2010; Charles 2010, 2014; Maxwell and Aggleton 2014a, 2014b, 2015). Yet, despite these advances, not enough attention has been paid to the propulsive power of certain mechanisms enabling the mobilisation of distinct forms of cultural capital which have been shown to be of value in terms of recruitment to elite higher education institutions and beyond (Friedman and Laurison 2019). Here, we draw upon unprecedented access (as insider researchers) to two elite private boys' secondary schools in England to shine a light on what we conceptualise as a designed 'lack of design' implemented by such schools. That is, an approach whereby schools use the autonomy and independence afforded to them by their status to make curriculum decisions characterised by a 'sense' of academic freedom or autonomy which is in fact, as we will show, constrained by the weight of expectation placed on the field of elite education. We draw upon Bourdieu's theory of habitus and field to consider these practices as mechanisms distinctive of elite private education, the importance of which have so far been under-studied in the literature.

For the purposes of this article, we use Khan's (2016) definition of elites and elite institutions as having disproportionate control over certain academic, social, cultural and economic resources considered of value. In the UK, it is predominantly fee-paying schools that hold enduring elite status including members of the influential Clarendon group of schools³ where attendance is 94 times more likely to enable an entry in *Who's Who* (Reeves et al. 2017) than if you attended any other type of school. Firstly, we introduce the landscape of private schooling in the UK, before providing some context and detail of the methods undertaken at each field site. We then set out the key mechanisms through which elite schools take advantage of the veneer of autonomy bestowed on them due to their private status, focusing on the freedoms around curriculum choice as well as those afforded to students and teachers within lessons. We argue that this so-called autonomy enables teachers and students to create an environment in which valued forms of embodied cultural capital, such as 'ease' (Khan 2011) can be practised and honed. However, we then go on to demonstrate how this sense of autonomy is misrecognised as such from *within* the institution, masking the signifiers or constraints of distinction upon which these schools sell themselves. And indeed, this so-called freedom is ultimately constrained by pressure from stakeholders (predominantly fee-paying parents) to enable access to elite higher educational institutions that value certain forms of institutionalised capital (Bourdieu 1986) such as academic credentials as well as valued forms of cultural capital such as 'ease' in the presence of power and authority.

The landscape of private schooling in the UK

Private schools in the UK continue to be associated with privilege and elitism, but the sector is diverse and includes numerous different types of school, including schools which are academically selective, faith-based, single-sex, day, boarding, preparatory⁴ and schools which cater for children with specific learning difficulties (Walford 2005, 2012). It is important to demarcate the specific schools within the private sector which are the focus of this article, that is, those that might be considered 'elite' in the sense that they have disproportionate control over resources even within the sector itself (Khan 2016), and due to their status as highly exclusive in relation to fees charged to parents.⁵ In the UK context perhaps most significant might be the nine private boys' boarding schools which make up the Clarendon Group of schools, signifying these schools as centres of power and educational

excellence, where the ongoing presence of dominant forms of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995) have enabled such schools to persist in propelling their male students to positions of power and influence in society, thereby perpetuating the continuing reproduction of privilege among certain groups of elite, white men (Reeves and Friedman 2024). Furthermore, studies have shown that elite schools have significant transnational reach, with an increasing literature focused on the development of forms of transnational and cosmopolitan capital in relation to the existence of, and connections between, elite schools on a global scale (see Howard and Maxwell 2020; Kenway and Koh 2013; Lillie 2021). These studies also point to the ways in which elite schools become adept at responding to changing social and historical conditions over time (see Kenway et al. 2017).

Of particular interest to this article are the many and varied ways in which elite private schools are given the autonomy to set their own curriculum and to operate within a landscape of relative freedom. Private schools 'are not subject to many of the requirements placed on state-funded schools... Their freedoms include greater autonomy relating to the curriculum, in hiring teachers, and in their admissions policies' (Long 2022, 4) and teachers themselves report having more autonomy than their state school counterparts (Green et al. 2024). Linked to this point, private schools sit outside the jurisdiction of Ofsted⁶ (though Ofsted do have the power to inspect private schools if requested by the Department for Education) and have their own inspectorate (the Independent Schools Inspectorate), responsible for monitoring the quality of the curriculum provided by private schools undergoing inspection. However, here we argue that this so-called autonomy is misrecognised as such by those working within the sector, and instead curriculum decisions are very much constrained by the expectations placed on those operating within the elite schools' sector, to propel their predominantly male students to positions of power and influence through the pipeline of elite recruitment.

Replicating the field and feeling at ease

Here, we draw upon the work of Bourdieu, and in particular his conceptualisation of capital, habitus, and field, to help us frame the findings of this article. Bourdieu conceptualised habitus as a structured system of dispositions which predispose a person to act spontaneously and/or strategically in a particular way, whether consciously or unconsciously (Bourdieu 1990). In other words, Bourdieu helps us to conceptualise the ways in which habitus can be embodied through distinct ways of 'standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking' (Bourdieu 1990, 70). The literature tells us that elite private schools offer a 'training ground' for certain elite dispositions to form such as ease (Khan 2011; Stenhouse and Ingram 2024), a lack of fear of authority (Taylor 2021) and cosmopolitanism (Forbes and Lingard 2015). However as yet, there has not been sufficient attention paid to the ways in which the choices made in relation to the curriculum, as well as the teaching practices informed by these choices, help contribute to the formation of such valued elite dispositions which have been shown to be significantly advantageous to those who possess these dispositions. As such, the processes and practices we go on to describe demonstrate the means through which certain advantageous dispositions become reproduced over the time spent in such schools.

However, habitus cannot exist without a field to exist in relation to. In short, habitus predisposes one to act in a particular way, but how well-aligned a person's habitus is with

a field determines how much power that person possesses in that field. The field will have certain rules that have to be followed that are different to the rules of another field (Bourdieu 1977). If one's habitus is well-aligned with the field (in this case the field of elite education) then the student will see and grasp certain opportunities. According to Bourdieu (1977), a student whose habitus is not well-aligned with the field will be blind to these advantageous opportunities and experience a hysteresis of habitus, liable to 'incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted' (Bourdieu, 1977, 78: 78). Even so, it is possible for a habitus to adjust to fit a particular field and in the case here, the presentation of certain opportunities offered to students would enable their habitus to adjust and restructure. For Bourdieu, 'belief is thus an inherent part of belonging to a field' (Bourdieu 1990, 67) and this belief is contained in the doxa of a field. As Bernstein (1975) helps us to see, teachers and students in private schools need to 'buy into' the means and ends of the practices taking place in the field, as demonstrated *via* the empirical data set out below.

Before continuing, it is important to set out the relationship between habitus, field and the valued forms of embodied cultural capital such as 'ease' mentioned above. Whilst both private and state-funded schools operate in the field of education, we are interested in the ways in which private schools are free of state control and so have autonomy over features beyond the public examinations taken by all students across the country, regardless of the type of school they attend. We argue that this so-called autonomy enables private schools to support an alignment between habitus and field that continues once students leave secondary school and enter university. Such an alignment enables certain forms of capital to be mobilised and provide power in the field. As such, the students operationalise, *via* the mechanisms we will analyse, forms of valued embodied cultural capital, or 'long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body' (Bourdieu 1986, 243) that prove to have long term advantages. Here, we draw upon the rich data we have been able to collect throughout our time conducting in-depth research at two elite boys' schools in England, to show the ways in which teachers in these schools have a 'feel for the game' of the dispositions that will help students to feel and perform ease in certain elite environments. These dispositions are then cultivated through the experiences that are provided as part of the private school offering and allow for a 'smooth choreography of action' (Stenhouse and Ingram 2024, 9) when applying to enter elite higher educational institutions. Ultimately, we show that there is a distinct collective power in the narrative of freedom and autonomy that is embraced by the school community, however this so-called freedom is very much constrained by the weight of expectation that is placed on the school by all stakeholders in relation to the ultimate goal of enabling access to elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge (Oxbridge).

Methods

In this paper, we draw upon data from two ethnographic studies that took place in private schools located in different parts of England: Fortune Park School (FPS) in the South and Northwell City School (NCS) in the North (both pseudonyms). The first focused primarily on student experiences of private schooling and the other on teachers' perceptions - it should be noted that both schools were boys' schools and are as such contributing not just to class inequalities, but also gender in that access to an education at these schools is exclusive and restricted to those with resources, including that of masculinity. Similarly, it is worth

pointing out that there are distinct differences in wealth and status between different private schools in England, particularly in relation to geography (Gamsu 2022) and this is almost certainly the case in relation to the two schools studied here. However, in general, FPS and NCS were similar in terms of size, facilities, student outcomes and overall 'elite status'. The authors met when their papers were allocated to the same slot at the British Sociological Association annual conference and were keen to work together to look at the synergies collected in the data for both projects, particularly as it is rare to be granted insider access to an elite private school (Lillie and Ayling 2021) let alone two and with such aligned goals for the research. By considering the data from the two projects together, we were able to identify similar patterns across both institutions.

Fortune park school (FPS)

FPS is a highly selective⁷ private day school located in Southern England. It caters for 1300 students from the age of 11–18 (with a linked junior school). Girls are admitted in the sixth form but make up a significant minority of the total sixth form population. The school is considered one of the top private schools in the country by the Good Schools Guide (n.d.), fulfilling all of the characteristics of the typical 'elite' school as discussed earlier including exceptional student outcomes with the majority of students leaving the Sixth Form to go on to attend elite universities, including Oxbridge and other Russell Group universities.⁸ It is located in a wealthy suburb where the predominant occupation type is professional, and the average household income is well above that of the country as a whole. Levels of relative deprivation are extremely low and life expectancy for residents is high compared to the UK average.

The research consisted of an in-depth ethnographic study of the school over a period of 18 months from 2018. Ethnography in this case included a period of prolonged, immersive fieldwork as an insider-researcher, with the majority of the time in the field spent carrying out participant observation of lessons, extracurricular activities and interactions between participants resulting in the production of a 'richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience' (O'Reilly 2004, 3). The data collection process also included interviews with 42 students and alumni as well as extended access to the field for over four years, where follow-up interviews and shorter periods of participation observation were undertaken.

The aim of the study was to closely observe daily school activities in a holistic manner, to identify recurring patterns in behaviour, language and interactions that help to structure and are structured by the students' embodiment of the dispositions that might contribute to the corporeal nature of privilege as a form of capital (Khan 2011). Furthermore, the study aimed to ensure as rounded an overview of the life of the school as possible, bearing in mind the constraints on the researcher's time. Data was collated, coded and analysed using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. An iterative-inductive approach to analysis was undertaken where the research progressed 'not in a linear way but in a spiral, [moving] forward from idea to theory to design to data collection to findings, analysis and back to theory' (O'Reilly 2004, 177). As such, the data analysis process was wholly informed by Bourdieusian theory, and in particular his concepts of habitus and capital, as a precursor to the coding process. For this paper, both authors focused on data that we have coded as 'freedom' or the potential misrecognition of freedom and autonomy from within each respective school community.

Northwell city school (NCS)

NCS is a private, similarly highly selective, school in the North of England with a comparable track record to FPS of students who go on to study at Oxbridge and other elite universities. The research at NCS examined a bespoke school-based intervention programme ('the Programme'), that aims to prepare students for application to and study at elite universities. Students were free to attend the sessions in the subject that they wished to study at university and sessions ran from January of the penultimate school year until December of the final school year to coincide with Oxbridge interviews. 17 of the 20 teachers on the Programme took part in the data collection period (2014-2015). Nearly half of the teacher participants had attended a private school themselves, and two thirds had gone on to study at an elite university, with half of these studying at Oxbridge. Just under half had a master's degree or doctorate in their subject and as such, the academic background of the participants comes with associated capital which informs the activities and teaching and learning approaches used in the Programme.

Data collection consisted of three phases: a reflective writing task, lesson observations, and semi-structured interviews. The reflective writing task was to ascertain what the teachers felt were the aims of the sessions and how they achieved these. Following an initial analysis of the responses, three teachers, Charlotte, Francis, and Matthew (all of whom either applied for or were accepted at Oxbridge) were chosen for session observations and semi-structured interviews,⁹ based on their reflections, where there were particular claims or capital that it would be useful to observe being transmitted in the sessions, whilst covering different subject areas. An observation schedule was devised for each observation based on points of interest from the reflective writing tasks, for example, specific forms of cultural capital, supplemented by field notes. Observations were audio-recorded. Analysis of the data (reflective writing tasks, observation recordings, observation notes and interview transcripts) involved coding using Bourdieu's tools of habitus, social capital, cultural capital.

As is the case with most elite private schools, FPS and NCS offer a traditional British education to their students, with GCSEs (General Certificate of Secondary Education) taken by students aged 14-16 and A-Levels (Advanced Level qualifications) taken by students in the sixth form (aged 16-18). The overall emphasis of the curriculum at the schools is that of breadth and flexibility with the core curriculum at GCSE limited to just four subjects out of a total of ten or 11 enabling the students to choose from as wide a range of other subjects as possible to take on at GCSE.¹⁰ The approach is similar at A-level, with students encouraged to pick from a relatively wide variety of subjects; students can choose from 26 different A level or equivalent subjects at NCS. Exam results at both schools are excellent, with circa 90% of students achieving grades A*-B¹¹ at A-level or equivalent and students go on to receive offers from some of the country's leading universities.

At the time of data collection, Author A (Emma) worked at FPS and Author B (Rachel) worked at NCS, both as teachers. As mentioned, such insider status afforded us significant and exclusive levels of access and insight that would be difficult to replicate at institutions where we might otherwise have been unknown. Indeed, being an insider provided us with an exceptionally strong base to carry out empirically rich research into the formation and reproduction of privilege at two elite private schools in England. Without having been known and trusted members of the respective school communities, it is highly probable that access would not have been granted. Therefore, as insider researchers, we were

conscious that our own positions might influence the data collected and were mindful of this throughout the process of data collection and analysis. We also tried to be wary of any existing assumptions when analysing the data; being positioned in the field, we may have 'bought into' the doxa of the field. We obtained gatekeeper consent from the heads of both schools, as well as informed consent from teachers and students involved in the data collection. Furthermore, we followed systematic procedures such as rigorous coding, to try to unmask bias. Ethical approval was granted for the studies from both the London School of Economics and Political Science (for Emma's study) and the University of Manchester (for Rachel's study).

Findings

Here, we draw upon data from both projects to consider the ways in which elite private schools utilise the flexibility offered by the freedom from curriculum control. This allows time and opportunities for transference of capital to take place, enabling the inculcation of valuable forms of cultural capital among students. We focus on the concept of a designed 'lack of design' to show how it is the ability to take advantage of this independence to design and deliver programmes and curricula which are beneficial to students, enabling them to continue on a trajectory of privilege once they leave the institution.

Freedom to create bespoke programmes

We have already seen the extent to which private schools have some autonomy over their curriculum offerings. This autonomy means that private schools can put in place provisions, opportunities and activities through which teachers can similarly exercise some form of autonomy over what is taught and how. For example, NCS and FPS both provide space in the timetable for 'enrichment' programmes to prepare students for application to and study at elite universities. Although these are formal in that they are timetabled (for both students and staff), the formality ends here, as the teachers are given autonomy over the content and structure of the sessions. Whilst both schools may be constrained to an extent in the curricula for 'regular' lessons due to the syllabi of public examinations, the freedom given to the teachers to choose what is on the curriculum for these university preparation sessions is something which is unique to these programmes.

The power of perceptions of autonomy in the classroom at NCS

Teachers in private schools have autonomy within the classroom which is rarely seen nowadays in state funded schools in England that are driven by Ofsted requirements and measures of student success in public examinations. At NCS, teachers reported that they work to their own strengths or interests in the sessions they teach on the Programme. Charlotte is free to allow sessions to revolve around 'current developments [in the subject area], personal interest and pupil interest', as well as allow the discussions to go 'off topic' as 'there are no curriculum constraints'. The fact that there are no curriculum constraints means that Charlotte is able to draw on her social and cultural capital to decide what to do in the sessions. She uses her own Oxbridge interview experience, her colleagues' knowledge and links with undergraduates and postgraduates studying the subject. For Matthew, the freedom

afforded in the Programme provides the opportunity to engage in areas which he deems are more interesting than those in the curriculum. Indeed, most of the teachers in the study seem to relish the autonomy they are afforded in relation to the flexibility of the Programme, this is reflected in the activities used by teachers in the sessions that exemplify a designed 'lack of design'

Firstly, we turn our attention to Charlotte's Magic Sack activity. In this activity from Charlotte's observed session, students are presented with a bag, or 'sack', of objects and a student is asked to identify the odd one out or say something interesting about the object they pick out. Charlotte gave her students this activity as she claims it must be a 'well-known thing that they do in Oxbridge interviews' because her colleagues were 'doing it before I came along' and it was something she experienced in her own Oxbridge interview:

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?'...I'll give you two minutes.

Charlotte claims she is free to choose what she does in the session. However, here we see just one example of Charlotte choosing to do an activity that is 'well-known' as being part of Oxbridge interviews. Charlotte's capital and her and her colleagues' 'feel for the game' is prescribing the content of her session.

Matthew's observed session revolved around the use of one poem. When asked in interview why he chose this poem, he answered:

In terms of why I chose the poem, I mean, I suppose there are two real reasons for it, one is it's something I studied myself and know a lot about was one of the reasons. It's on the undergraduate reading list for a lot of top universities because it's quite an accessible text so, I mean, the reason it's on their reading list is because it's of an appropriate length for that kind of level, the vocabulary is appropriately familiar and yet also challenging in terms of its archaism et cetera and specific vocabulary. And it's quite an exciting poem, really, in terms of what happens in it. I mean some poems are very, very abstract...but I think that it is slightly more accessible than some of the other poems...There is an abstractness to it, there's also something that you can latch onto in a narrative sense so I mean it's just an interesting poem and it's a very famous, big landmark in revolutionary poetry.

Notably, Matthew says he 'chose' the poem. Yet we can see the thought, and ultimately capital, that he draws on to 'choose' this poem. As Matthew studied the poem himself, perhaps he feels he is very knowledgeable about it and the students can benefit from his knowledge. He also thinks it is an 'exciting poem'. Matthew clearly drew on his cultural capital, informed by experiences which have structured his habitus of undergraduate study to determine this poem was suitable for the students, both in terms of whether they could access it academically and that they would find engaging. However, there is a contradiction here – Matthew is choosing a text which he thinks will distinguish his students, but it must be accessible. Perhaps Matthew has the skills and knowledge to make the text accessible to his students, a skill and knowledge which other teachers might not have; this skill might be part of his habitus and linked with capital associated with being an Oxbridge graduate.

Matthew, like other teachers, drew on his own strengths to provide content for the sessions: 'I tend to focus on poetry really because that's my sort of specialism at university really'. Matthew's cultural capital gives him knowledge about the appropriateness and accessibility of the content for his students, as well as captivating their interest.

Whilst both Charlotte and Matthew perceive they have autonomy to choose the content of the sessions, they are in fact constrained by what they think Oxbridge admissions tutors require. A teacher whose habitus is well aligned in this educational field is better placed to select the right forms of capital to establish distinction in his/her students. This freedom allows the teachers to be in charge of what they consider will distinguish and therefore advantage their students when applying for prestigious universities. As such, the freedom and lack of mandatory curriculum suggests there is what might be called a designed 'lack of design' where the teachers' freedom to choose the curriculum may be important to the system of capital transmission as it is indicative of a fit between each teacher's habitus and the field. Moreover, whilst the teachers perceive that they have autonomy over the curriculum, when questioned further, it was evident that they were drawing on their own social and cultural capital (social networks, experiences, and academic background) to inform what they did in the sessions. The transmission of capital requires work, as Bourdieu would say, on the parts of both the teachers and the students; the teachers to maintain their social networks and provide the experiences in the sessions and the students to fully engage with the experiences/activities. We now examine how the students at FPS engaged with experiences and opportunities provide through being at a private school.

Embodiment of cultural capital

Data from FPS gives us evidence of the student perspective on the flexibility afforded by the lack of constraint over the curriculum characteristic of elite private schools. Here, students commented more broadly on their appreciation of the academic independence and freedom offered by the school in relation to their experiences inside the classroom. Oliver, a sixth form student at FPS, commented on the freedom to pursue one's own course of learning as being a source of confidence within the students:

I think freedom is one of the big things at FPS... I think it's all about freedom of expression, freedom to pursue your own course of learning, freedom to communicate freely without being judged for what you are trying to say. I think that is probably the source of a lot of the confidence, maybe even arrogance that you see as fostered in the students.

Similar points were raised in a peer-led focus group between students where they made specific reference to the significance of being given the freedom to choose what subjects they pursue (which is not the case at most state schools in the UK) and the extent to which this provided them with a sense of self-belief and empowerment when they leave school:

Harry: And I dropped history at Year 9 and that really meant that I could pursue other things. And then I could do drama and that kind of thing which is really...

Daniel: Yes.

Harry: And that's what led me to the extracurricular side of it. And so I think that the freedom that we have to choose what subjects we pursue, how we want to pursue them, I think really helps to build a confidence and also a self-belief. That's important for when we leave school.

Oliver: I think FPS just wants us to learn, when it comes to... It doesn't matter where it is or what kind of thing you're learning.

Harry is aware that confidence and self-belief are important attributes and notes the value of these beyond school. He claims these attributes have been fostered by his perceived freedom of academic choice. As such, the lack of design, or freedom, of the curriculum, is actually a design feature of the curriculum, used as a mechanism through which students buy into the doxa of the field and believe they are developing confidence and self-belief, when in fact valuable forms of capital, in this case empowerment, are being embodied.

Students also related this academic freedom to the concept of opportunities, equating the lack of constraint to enabling the students to choose the subjects they most enjoy or believe they will benefit the most from in the future. Thus, we can see here how the students themselves are making direct connections between the freedom they are given in relation to the curriculum at FPS and the accrual of certain forms of capital that will be beneficial in later life, including confidence and self-belief, or a sense of 'ease' that has been much written about in relation to private schools and the inculcation of privileging dispositions (Khan 2011; Stenhouse and Ingram 2024, Taylor 2024). Here, a distinct curriculum decision to allow for choice, or a purposeful 'lack of design', provides one of many opportunities for students to benefit from the flexibility of the school environment:

Mikey: I feel like there's a lot more independence given at private schools. So, you're having not to rely on other people as much.

Interviewer: And can anyone expand on that at all?

Freddie: Well, this school gives a lot more liberties than other schools. Well, that's what teachers say at the school. You have a lot more freedom. Because in some schools, for GCSE, you have to do the subjects which they say, but here you're only restrained to a few subjects which you have to do and the rest you can choose. So it gives you more opportunities to be at a school like this.

Mikey: Well, I do quite a bit of music, and in some schools, if you do this amount then you're kind of, not forced, but made to do certain things in groups and they'd be very, kind of strict. But here it's not like that. They let you do your own thing, and then in the end, you actually do more than you expect you would, because there's no one forcing you.

And I guess that's with all aspects of the school, not only music. Like, people don't force you to do things. I mean it can for some people not be that good, but I think for most people it does help because you feel like you're doing it for your own good, and that kind of feels better after.

Mikey appears to demonstrate a habitus that is well-aligned with the field as he sees opportunities and takes advantage of them. We see the students are well-versed in the rhetoric of valuable skills, but the 'lack of design' does not simply 'lead' to independence, as Mikey states in the interview; for students to be successful they must embody these skills, and the freedom or autonomy over the curriculum supports an environment in which these skills can be practised and honed.

We now turn our attention to the case of Alex and how a well-aligned habitus smooths the transition from elite school to elite university. Alex was interviewed once he had left FPS and had started at the University of Oxford. He comments on the ways in which the designed 'lack of design' in relation to the curriculum has been helpful for him once he started at an elite higher education institution:

I think it was also helped by having slightly more academic freedom at FPS... Because at least, with the humanities, you are given complete academic freedom. Well, not complete academic freedom but there is a huge amount of freedom.

In the first two terms [at Oxford] I had something like ten hours of contact time a week, but that means the vast majority of time is going away and doing your reading yourself. Obviously, there wasn't anything quite like that at FPS, but the more academic freedom you'd been given at school, the more ready you are to deal with time management and things like that, which is really important when it comes to university.

Here we see Alex's sense of ease as he transitions to life at Oxford. He justified this ease as having good time-management skills, when in fact, the perceived freedom he had at FPS has been a mechanism to give him a 'feel for the game' and better align his habitus with the elite higher education field. The students' perceptions of freedom have given them opportunities to explore their interests as well as contributed to the inculcation of valuable forms of capital such as confidence or 'ease'. However, it is interesting and important to consider the ways in which this so-called freedom of choice could be framed as an illusion, and that the students at FPS, as well as the teachers at NCS, remain very much constrained by the system in terms of what constitutes success. The message put across by the schools in their marketing and advisory conversations with students and parents is that of freedom of choice and flexibility, yet this 'freedom' is very much informed by the signifiers of distinction upon which these schools sell themselves, including for example the restriction of qualifications offered to the 'gold standard' A-level, with some A-levels, including Sociology, rarely taught in the sector (Cant, Savage, and Chatterjee 2020), and the expectation that every student will apply to university, with very little variation from this pathway encouraged or supported. This 'freedom of choice' outside of lessons is, as we shall now see, mirrored by the school community's perceptions of freedom and choice within the classroom itself.

Freedom to express oneself

The enrichment programme at NCS not only affords the teachers freedom over the curriculum but allows the students freedom and choice within the sessions as well. For example, William achieved student-led sessions by splitting his group and moving between two rooms:

The best sessions are the ones where the groups are smaller. Initially I achieve this by dividing a group of say 15 students into two. I then move between two rooms where the students are discussing the problems. This certainly makes it clear that they are leading the discussion as I am not present for the whole session with a particular group.

Similarly, Charlotte claims to give the students autonomy by enabling student-led sessions. As such, the students are free from the constraints of what we might call a 'normal' lesson where the teacher is in charge of the classroom and students might defer to her/his authority. Instead, there is a sense that the usual power relationship does not apply in these special sessions. As another of the teachers (John) describes, his students are 'often happy to be led' in regular lessons, yet in the Programme sessions he is trying to invert this experience for his students and instead have them lead and guide the sessions. Charlotte demonstrated the same expectation, starting her observed session with the comment: 'You've got two minutes to think of something interesting to tell me'. The ideas the students proposed then formed the next twenty minutes of the session. It was also noted in Matthew's observed

session that ‘ideas and interpretations come from the students’. The students are therefore being given an opportunity, with the support of the teacher, to explore their own interests and ideas in greater depth within a safe, low-stakes environment, where they are being ‘taught’ skills that can contribute toward the accrual of valued forms of cultural capital which prove greatly advantageous when embarking on future trajectories, particularly within elite higher education institutions.

At FPS, students talk of the flexible and forgiving environment they experience in lessons more generally, and the privileges associated with this. Indeed, the students value this safe environment, as we see with Charlie, a sixth former at FPS, discussing the value of lessons being safe spaces where opinions can be put forward, much as is the case at NCS in the Programme sessions:

Charlie: I think I would say a key part of it is the fact that lessons are so based on discussion. And that even if, I don’t know, I guess my first few lessons I probably stayed back quiet. And I didn’t really contribute much but I think that was just a type of developing my opinions and my ideas. And I think that’s why I think confidence is really very linked to having your own opinion. Because if you are able to discuss things, you are almost forced to develop your own perspective of things because here we are asked about our personal point of view. And that did not happen at a lot of schools, especially my old school... So, yes, definitely. And because that is such a key part of lessons, everyone is there to listen to you regardless of what you say. It definitely is a much safer, open place where I have become more confident in myself and my opinions. And being able to speak to people and about what I think.

Yet again, we can see an apparent designed ‘lack of design’ in action here, where the practices in place encourage an environment in which students feel safe contributing to class discussion. Indeed, Charlie is almost identifying that one way to demonstrate ‘confidence’ is by voicing an opinion. Here ‘confidence’ becomes legitimated through its arbitrary misrecognition as ‘voicing an opinion’ when in fact such embodied skills have been shown to be helpful when entering elite higher education institutions and professions (Ashley and Empson 2017; Rivera 2015). Furthermore, the students’ freedom from the constraints of the expected hierarchies in place within classrooms further facilitates the non-hierarchical relationships between students and teachers. Providing opportunities in which students can learn to embody a lack of fear when speaking with those in positions of power (Taylor 2021), in this case teachers, replicates and prepares students for the field of elite universities, in particular Oxbridge, where such attributes may be valued in the admissions process (Stenhouse and Ingram 2024). These opportunities allow students to take risks and to understand what is appropriate challenge in a safe environment, so that it becomes part of their habitus when they move to the field of elite universities.

Discussion and implications

This paper has examined the understudied mechanisms operating in elite private schools in England, that enable the transmission and embodiment of valued forms of embodied cultural capital. We have drawn upon rich data from two elite private schools in different parts of the country to show that the autonomy afforded to such schools allows for a designed ‘lack of design’ in relation to curriculum planning. This, in turn, allows certain mechanisms to operate both within and outside of lessons that contribute toward the transmission of valuable forms of capital which have been demonstrated to have power and value once

students leave school and almost inevitably attend elite higher education institutions and professions.

We have shown that teachers relish the autonomy they are given in enrichment programme sessions at NCS to draw on their cultural capital to inform the content and teaching approaches used. The teachers' habituses are well-aligned with the educational field. This means they have a sense, perhaps deeply ingrained or unconscious, of what is 'interesting' or 'important' and thus which experiences, knowledge and skills constitute capital. The adaptability of the Programme to teachers' interests implies an almost designed 'lack of design'; the curricula might never have been intentionally designed or imposed, but simply emergent from the 'feel for the game' inhabited by teachers. As such, there is a form of *deliberate* design in this so-called 'lack of design', although this deliberate design may not have been recognised on the part of the teacher to begin with. Therefore, we argue that this perception of freedom over the curriculum is misrecognised as such by those embedded within the school community. It is instead dictated or constrained by a desire to embody cultural capital in students and form a habitus aligned with elite university institutions.

Moreover, students' habituses become so well-aligned with the elite field that the pathway from elite school to elite university becomes well-scaffolded and almost seamless. Thus, the designed 'lack of design' presented here enables students at these private schools to practise and further embody valuable forms of cultural capital that scaffold the pipeline of elite recruitment. This paper has therefore shown that the illusion of autonomy is crucial in relation to the reproduction of privilege in private schools, where certain advantages are afforded to students, already privileged in terms of race, gender and class, who are able to further benefit from the designed 'lack of design' process in place at such schools.

Therefore, if elite universities are genuinely interested in widening participation, we advocate for the auditing and scrutinising of the practices of admissions teams, with checklists instated for admissions tutors ensuring they acknowledge the potential advantages privately educated students, and particularly privately educated men, have received through their education, with a specific focus on their performance of 'ease' at an interview. Equally, admissions tutors should be encouraged to reflect on their own biases in the interview process in relation to the reasons why a student might not perform as 'expected'. Indeed, the advantages accrued by those attending elite schools require foregrounding within these processes to level the playing field and disrupt the current 'rules of the game' which continue to favour those who have attended elite private schools.

Notes

1. Almost 40% of Britain's most influential people are privately educated, although only 7% of the population attend a private school (The Sutton Trust and The Social Mobility Commission 2019).
2. A reference work including over 32,500 entries of influential people in British life.
3. A group of nine public schools including seven boarding schools (Eton, Charterhouse, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Westminster, and Winchester) and two day schools (St Paul's and Merchant Taylor's). These schools are considered to be at the top of the so-called hierarchy when it comes to elite private schools in the UK.
4. Preparatory schools are private schools for younger children (commonly aged 3-11). The aim of preparatory schools is to prepare pupils for private secondary schools at the age of 11 or 13.
5. Such schools are likely to become even more expensive and exclusive once Labour abolish the VAT exemption on private school fees.

6. Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) inspect and regulate education providers in England. They have substantial power within the state education system in the UK, including the power to shut down schools entirely, and so being outside of their jurisdiction is a signifier of significant freedom for private schools.
7. FPS is selective both academically (students have to pass a rigorous admissions process to obtain access to the school) and financially, with significant financial means required by parents/carers for school fees.
8. A group of 24 self-selected research-intensive universities with considerable social, economic and cultural influence.
9. This article draws upon data from these observations and interviews, as well as the other 14 teachers' reflective writing tasks.
10. This is very low compared to the equivalent requirements at state-funded schools where students' choice of subject at this level of study tends to be restricted.
11. A* is the top grade at A level.

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