

How Does Privilege Play a Role in School Choice?

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Abstract: The role of privilege in school choice has become a significant topic of inquiry in social science and critical theory. This paper explores the intricate interplay between education and social factors, particularly in school selection between public and private schools, and investigates the influence of privilege on academic achievement. The article examines parents' decision-making processes during school selection, disparities in resources between public and private schools, and the strategies to address educational inequalities. Drawing from theories of social stratification and ideological state apparatuses, the study highlights how education perpetuates existing social hierarchies. The article also discusses the concept of meritocracy as a strategy to address educational disparities and the implications it has on students from different social backgrounds. Finally, the paper emphasizes the importance of acknowledging privilege in education and suggests measures to promote a fairer and more equitable educational environment. Understanding the impact of privilege on school choice and academic opportunities is crucial for developing informed and inclusive educational policies and practices.

Keywords: privilege, meritocracy, social location, education, intersectionality

1. Introduction

The concept of privilege has become an essential topic of inquiry in social science and critical theory. It refers to the benefits and advantages of individuals or groups based on their status characteristics [1]. This paper delves into the intricate interplay between education and social factors, particularly in the context of school choice between public and private schools, considering the influence of privilege on academic achievement and exploring the strategies to address educational inequalities in the present era.

Throughout history, individuals have been instilled with the belief that success is indispensable for the desired destination of their social background. Nevertheless, the concept of "class consciousness," as expounded by social scientist Paul Kingston [2], brings attention to the prevailing issue that individuals tend to neglect that our society is structured and one's social position profoundly influences life experiences and opportunities. Max Weber, the German sociologist, further classified community into distinct strata, including the upper class, upper middle class, lower middle class, and working class, while also developing the notion of "life chances," which denotes the opportunities individuals possess for social advancement and economic prosperity [3]. Weber's ideas prompt us to consider the interplay between education and social factors, shedding light on how education facilitates the attainment of "success" in life and how privilege, determined by one's social status,

engenders potential for academic achievement [4]. Education, a pivotal determinant of future success, is deeply influenced by the privilege associated with one's social location, leading to varying choices in schools, especially between public and private institutions. To gain deeper insights into this phenomenon, we will delve into during school selection, explore the disparities in resources between public and private schools, and analyze the strategies devised to confront the persisting inequalities in education today. By examining these aspects, we can the complex dynamics that contribute to the perpetuation or mitigation of educational disparities, thus paving the way for more informed and equitable educational policies and practices.

2. Education as ideological state apparatuses: reinforcing social hierarchies

According to the concept of "ideological state apparatuses" proposed by Marxist theorist Louis Althusser and American scholars Bowles and Gintis [5,6], the educational system functions as a mechanism to disseminate specific ideologies, producing a compliant workforce and perpetuating the power and status of particular societal groups. This theory suggests that education serves to stratify children into different social positions, thereby reinforcing existing social hierarchies. While some may perceive this notion as akin to a conspiracy theory, its applicability becomes evident in real-life dynamics. Taking university as the first step in upward social mobility, Redpath and Harvey conducted research in 1987 to explore the aspirations of young individuals regarding higher education. They randomly selected 485 participants, some already enrolled in higher education and others not, from schools and colleges across England. Their investigation focused on the participants' social class, based on the head of the household, and the type of educational institution they previously attended. The overall findings indicated that students from private schools generally exhibited higher rates of applying to higher education than those from maintained schools [2]. It is essential to acknowledge that this research may not fully represent the current situation since it was conducted. It is imperative to recognize that the findings of this research might not be fully reflective of the present circumstances as it was conducted decades ago. Furthermore, the study did not take into account potential internal differentiations within the private education sector. However, the findings of the study still indicate that attending a private school may enhance the probability of accessing higher education, particularly for specific social groups.

3. School selection

Drawing from the insights of Walford [2], the historical association between private schools and the aspirations of affluent parents seeking to ensure the transmission of their privileged positions to their children underscores the profound implications of parental social structural location on their children's life chances [7]. Consequently, parents exercise caution during the school selection process, acutely aware of its potential impact on their children's prospects. Private education forms the foundation of this market, driven not only by the desire of parents to maintain their social status but also by the relatively higher fees compared to public primary schools [8]. Research conducted by Irene Fox [9], exploring the motivations of parents with children in traditional public and private schools categorizes the reasons for utilizing private education into two primary themes.

Firstly, pursuing academic success is the primary concern for parents who opt for private education. Their willingness to invest significantly in enrolling their children in private primary schools stems from the belief that such an investment will yield tangible returns, providing access to superior learning resources, advanced equipment, and a wide array of learning opportunities to nurture their children's interests [2]. Beyond academic achievements, parents seek character development and discipline, viewing private schools as more effective in preparing their children for the future (Walford, [2]. This preparation extends beyond mere transitions to secondary education or university;

it encompasses developing skills that can guide them to better career choices, potentially fostering professional competence and self-reliance.

Conversely, middle-class parents, adhering to contemporary professional norms, engage in concerted cultivation, actively stimulating their children's cognitive and social skills. In contrast, working-class and economically disadvantaged families face the constant challenge of providing necessities, such as food, shelter, and support, amidst economic difficulties and demands [10]. The educational choices available to children from the working class are notably constrained, often offering limited access to enrichment opportunities. Consequently, these children spend more time in familial duties and chores, acquiring distinct skill sets from their middle-class counterparts. As mentioned earlier, children from middle-class backgrounds often benefit from more opportunities to achieve academic success. Those from working-class families may excel in practical tasks and exhibit interpersonal abilities. Thus, the concept of "ideological state apparatuses" presents a critical perspective on the role of education in perpetuating societal norms and reinforcing existing power structures. In selecting private education underscore the impact of their social structural location on their children's life chances. Moreover, the differences in educational choices and skill development between middle-class and working-class families highlight the complex interplay of social, economic, and cultural factors shaping educational experiences. By understanding these dynamics, educators can strive for more equitable and inclusive educational practices that bridge the gap between every child with the opportunity to realize their full potential.

4. Meritocracy

The inequality and disparity between children from working-class backgrounds have prompted societies to adopt the prevailing strategy of meritocracy. Meritocracy is an ideology rooted in social justice based on equal opportunities. It posits that social justice can be achieved when individuals have an equal chance to compete for social resources on their merits rather than their inheritance or wealth [11]. Essentially, meritocracy motivates students to pursue high achievements and transform their destinies through hard work and effort. It instills extrinsic motivation in young individuals to strive for academic success. The essence of meritocracy lies in emphasizing an individual's talent and effort as paramount, prioritizing these over one's identity or socio-economic status. This perspective seemingly offers a promising and egalitarian future for society. However, when revisiting the concept of "class consciousness," we become cognizant of how it leads individuals to believe they bear full responsibility for their educational outcomes, disregarding the influence of social capital, cultural capital, and intersectionality. China's gaokao (national college entrance examination) exemplifies the ideal meritocratic environment wherein students believe they can secure a brighter future through unwavering efforts [12]. Research by Jin and Ball demonstrates the significance of the meritocratic educational system from interviews with students [11]. They illustrate that school achievements carve the path towards self-reliance, offering recognition, personal efficacy, and self-worth, particularly during adolescence. The meritocratic system is crucial for students to escape their current positions and achieve upward social mobility. While acknowledging the value of meritocracy, the single-minded pursuit of exam performance may lead to neglecting the development of personal interests and broader social skills and cultural competencies [13]. Once students enter university, social skills may widen the gap between working-class and middle-class backgrounds, thereby embedding structural social class inequalities within the educational system.

5. Discussion

The pervasiveness of privilege within a highly structured society affects individuals across various walks of life. While the concept of privilege may not inherently align with human morality,

dismissing its significance is not a viable option. Instead, it becomes imperative to address privilege and its impact, particularly in the context of students' learning opportunities within the education system and the gap between privileged and less fortunate individuals. Practical strategies to mitigate the influence of privilege necessitate the involvement of government policies and school initiatives. In Walford's work on "Privatization and Privilege in Education," he fervently opposes the privatization of education, arguing that it is detrimental to student groups and society [14]. While completely discarding private schools may be unrealistic, given the demand from parents seeking "better" education for various reasons, including social status maintenance or improved learning opportunities, it underscores the necessity of balancing public and private schooling. Moreover, it highlights the importance of fostering healthy competition among schools to enhance overall educational quality. Nevertheless, stringent regulations concerning funding allocation encompass inclusive education, school infrastructure, safety measures, and cultivating a conducive school culture. Although such rules may not entirely eradicate the inequalities stemming from privilege, they represent indispensable measures for promoting a fairer educational environment.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has delved into the intricate relationship between privilege, education, and social factors, specifically focusing on the dynamics of school selection and its impact on academic achievement. Through the lens of social stratification, ideological state apparatuses, and the concept of meritocracy, we have illuminated how privilege perpetuates existing social hierarchies and contributes to educational disparities. Parents' choices during school selection are influenced by their social structural location, highlighting the varying motivations and resources available to families from different socio-economic backgrounds. Recognizing and addressing privilege's impact is crucial for equitable educational policies. Doing so can foster a fairer environment where all students have equal opportunities to succeed, regardless of their backgrounds. This endeavor demands collaboration among educators, policymakers, and society to dismantle barriers and create a more inclusive educational environment.

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