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Fragile Legitimacy: Exclusive Boarding Schools Between the Meritocratic Norm and Their Clientele's Desire for a Competitive Advantage

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ABSTRACT

Exclusive boarding schools in social environments where the meritocratic norm is prevalent are faced with a tension between parents' desire to give their children a head start in the competition for educational qualifications, social prestige and jobs on the one hand and the powerful social norm of advancement by merit under conditions of "equal opportunity" on the other. This article looks at how two exclusive boarding schools, Eton College in England and Schule Schloss Salem in Germany, deal with this double challenge in presenting themselves to their environment, attempting to preserve social legitimacy while staying attractive to their clientele. The article shows that the ways in which the schools deal with these conflicting demands depends strongly on the differing systems contexts they find themselves in.

Introduction

Meritocracy, Equality of Opportunity, and Parents' Desire to Give Their Children a Competitive Advantage Over Their Peers

Exclusive boarding schools in social environments where the meritocratic norm is prevalent are faced with a tension between parents' desire to give their children a head start in the competition for educational qualifications, social prestige and jobs on the one hand and the powerful social norm of advancement by merit under conditions of "equal opportunity" on the other. This article looks at how two exclusive boarding schools, Eton College in England and Schule Schloss Salem in Germany, handle this tension in presenting themselves to their environment, attempting to preserve social legitimacy while staying attractive to their clientele.

Modern, Western democracies tend to perceive themselves as "meritocracies" (see Yair, 2007). This means that individual *merit*—usually expressed in the "currency" (Deutsch, 1979, p. 393) of educational certificates—is supposed to determine the allocation of life chances, not ascriptive criteria such as race, social background or wealth.

The term "meritocracy" was coined by the British sociologist Michael Young in a dystopian, satirical novel depicting a society in which individuals were guided to the position in society they were best suited for with the help of psychometrics (Young, 1958, 2006). In today's "fluid meritocracy" (Allen, 2014, p. 132), notions of meritocracy have been personalized and marketized, but the normative ideal that individual life chances should be allocated according to merit still

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forms the core of the notion of meritocracy. Therefore, in societies subscribing to the meritocratic norm, it should not be possible to inherit or buy educational privilege. Rather, access to education should follow the principle of “equality of opportunity” for all, which according to Roemer (2006, p. 1) can be defined as “setting the initial conditions in the competition for social goods so as to give all, regardless of their backgrounds, an equal chance at achievement”. Beyond this “minimal core” of the concept, equality of opportunity can be defined in a wide variety of ways (see Gamoran & Long, 2007, p. 38–41; Giesinger, 2007), just as conceptions of what constitutes merit and how it should be determined can vary considerably (see Waldow, 2014; Zimdars, 2007, p. 14). The principle of “equality of opportunity” is an integral part of the meritocratic idea (see Becker & Hadjar, 2009, p. 42), seemingly reconciling two potentially conflicting basic norms prevalent in democratic, capitalist societies, i.e., the principle of selection by merit on the one hand and the principle of equal rights for everyone on the other (see Kett, 2013, p. 264).

While it is important for schools and universities to act *as if* they were offering equal opportunities and operating according to the meritocratic norm, in their actual mode of operation these norms are violated constantly. Empirical research has shown again and again that even in societies where the meritocratic norm is very powerful, factors such as wealth and social class continue to play a massive role in the actual distribution of educational and social opportunities (see Becker & Lauterbach, 2016; McNamee & Miller, 2018). Thus, there is a gaping chasm between meritocratic societies’ and educational institutions’ “normative self-definition” (Solga, 2005, p. 23)—or more accurately “normative self-presentation”—and the way in which the allocation of life chances in these societies *actually* works.

The meritocratic norm stands in tension to many parents’ desire to give their children a head start in the education system and thereby in the race for social and occupational positions (Devine, 2004). Many school systems around the world allow educational institutions to offer special forms of education to children and/or parents who are willing and able to pay for them. Among the most conspicuous examples for this phenomenon are exclusive, high-fee boarding schools.

These schools are caught up in a dilemma: on the one hand, schools need to justify to families that the high fees they charge—often equivalent to or exceeding the average annual income in the country they are situated in—will actually pay off, i.e., lead to substantial benefits for the pupils. On the other hand, schools must not create the impression that it is possible to simply buy privilege and competitive advantage by attending such a school, which would violate the meritocratic ideal. Previous research suggests that the pressure to legitimize and naturalize privilege through “institutionalized merit”, i.e., educational achievement, has intensified over the last few decades (see Baker & LeTendre, 2005, chapter 3; Kett, 2013; Khan, 2011). If schools do not succeed in demonstrating that they conform to the meritocratic norm, loss of social legitimacy may be the consequence; ultimately, the school’s survival may be at stake. Due to the fact that these schools tend to be perceived as providing a privileged path to elite positions, the pressure to conform to the meritocratic ideal is particularly strong. In addition, claiming that the school produces an elite of *merit*, not of wealth or social background, may in turn make the school more attractive to parents seeking a competitive advantage for their children, as this enhances the symbolic value of degrees, whether this claim has any basis in fact or not (see Khan, 2011).

This article will explore and compare how Eton College in England and Schule Schloss Salem in Germany deal with this double challenge—i.e., maintaining social legitimacy while staying attractive for fee-paying parents—in how they present themselves to prospective pupils, parents and society at large. For the purposes of this article, we are thus interested in the two schools’ “formal structures”, i.e., the “public face” (Brooks & Waters, 2015b, p. 212) the schools present to their environment. How the schools *actually* operate when selecting and educating pupils is not part of our research question; for insights into these and other aspects of the day-to-day functioning of exclusive boarding schools see e.g., Khan (2011), Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard (2012), Kalthoff (1997) and Gibson (2017).

Selection of Cases

The article presents a “contextual comparison” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2010, p. 326), i.e., an empirical, context-sensitive small-N comparative study of the two cases. For the research question addressed here, Eton College and Schule Schloss Salem provide for an interesting comparison due to the particular character of their similarities and differences. Both with regard to their self-perception and to the perception from outside, the two schools are among the most well-known and “leading” boarding schools in the respective countries they are situated in. Both charge very high fees and seemingly violate the meritocratic norm in a particularly blatant or at least particularly visible way. What makes the comparison interesting is the fact that the national contexts they are situated in differ strongly when it comes to the role of these schools in the (re)production of elites (for a comparative overview, see Zymek, 2014). The comparison will show how the different functional and contextual logics the schools find themselves in leads to different ways of addressing the “double challenge” of conflicting environmental demands, thereby illuminating the nature of this challenge further.

Context(s)

When doing a contextual comparison like the one attempted here, it is important to identify which contexts are relevant for the analysis (see also the remarks on method below). The schools studied here are not just situated in a national context, but also in international and local contexts (Brooks & Waters, 2015a). For issues of social legitimacy, the contextual level on which the (legal) rules regulating the schools’ operation are made is particularly relevant. In the case of the Eton College, this is the national level, in the case of Schule Schloss Salem, it is the national combined with the federal state level, since in Germany federal states are officially responsible for educational matters. Rules of this type play a decisive role for the operation of schools of the type studied here. This includes a wide variety of aspects, ranging from decisions concerning charity status and tax exemptions via the schools’ ability to confer certain qualifications such as the *Abitur* to the decision whether fee-paying private schools are allowed to exist at all (cf. the ongoing discussion in the UK mentioned below).

However, the international context also plays a role for the investigation. Both schools analyzed here are very “international” in that they attract a significant number of international pupils and claim to prepare their alumni for future study and career paths in a globalized world. Especially the latter type of “internationality” can be a source of legitimacy and a selling point for schools (see Waldow, 2018), particularly for parents interested in acquiring “global capital” and facilitating access to exclusive institutions of higher education on a global scale (Brooks & Waters, 2015b, p. 213). However, Brooks and Waters (2015b) have shown that for British public schools it can be attractive to downplay this internationalism in order not to damage its branding as providing an essentially “British” education.

Exclusive schools with an international outreach often also stress that they are embedded in their local communities (see Brooks & Waters, 2015a). However, we cannot enter into this topic in any detail here for reasons of space.

Presentation of the Cases

A Fast Track to Elite Positions: Eton College

Eton College is a boys’ boarding school close to the town of Windsor just outside London. It was founded in 1440 and has around 1,300 pupils between the ages of 13 and 18. It is an independent school, i.e., not run or financed by the state, and has charitable status.

In 2018, about 6.6 per cent of pupils attended the independent sector of the English school system (Department for Education, 2018, Table 2a). This proportion has remained fairly constant over the last 40 years (Office for National Statistics, 2010, p. 29–30). While the independent sector is quite diverse and does not only comprise “elite” schools, some independent schools play an extremely important role for elite reproduction in England, especially the old public schools belonging to the exclusive group of the so-called “Clarendon Nine” (Walford, 1990, p. 1). Eton College heads this group more or less unchallenged.

Despite the fact that the role of public schools for elite formation has diminished somewhat over the last century or so, British public schools remain “extraordinarily powerful channels of elite formation” (Reeves, Friedman, Rahal, & Flemmen, 2017, p. 1139). According to a recent study (Reeves et al., 2017), the alumni of the “Clarendon Nine” are 94 times more likely to reach elite positions in Britain than those who have attended any other school (see also Hartmann, 2008; Milburn, 2012). Many prominent figures in politics, the media, the church, the higher echelons of the civil service and leading figures in various branches of industry etc. are Old Etonians. Many Old Etonians of course also join non-UK-based elites, but it is hard to find reliable information on this issue.

On the level of practical operation, it can be argued that Eton violates the norm of equality of opportunity in several ways: First, Eton is an all-boys school. Second, inherited privilege seems to play a role for school choice and admittance. According to the school, in 2012 about 40 per cent of the newly admitted pupils had a family connection to Old Etonians, i.e., alumni of the school (Eton College, 2012; this information is no longer available on the school website). Third, the financial burden of sending a son to Eton College is considerable. In 2018, school fees amounted to 40,668 pounds per year (Eton College, 2018d). This is considerably more than the UK average annual median earnings (in 2017 28,600 GBP, see Office for National Statistics, 2017). However, not all pupils pay the full fee (see below).

Elite Education or Alternative to the State Sector for Failing Pupils from Wealthy Families? Schule Schloss Salem

Schule Schloss Salem is Germany’s biggest, most expensive and most well-known boarding school. It is located in a rural area by Lake Constance. The School was founded in 1920 by Max von Baden (the last chancellor of the German Empire) and Kurt Hahn (a prominent progressive educator who emigrated to Britain in the 1930s and founded Gordonstoun School in Scotland and the first United World College in Wales). The school has about 600 pupils and has been co-educational from the outset. In terms of degrees it offers the German *Abitur* as well as the international Baccalaureate Diploma. Schule Schloss Salem is a private school. Apart from partial government subsidies for the cost of tuition (as set out in the Private School Law of the federal state of Baden-Württemberg), the school must cover all its operating expenses with school fees. For a 5th grader, parents pay an annual fee of 41,400€, for an IB-student parents pay 44,400€ (2018). These school fees nearly equal an average annual salary in Germany (in 2018 46,560€ before taxes, see Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020).

There is no systematic research on the careers of the alumni of exclusive boarding schools in Germany (see Deppe, 2019; Züchner, Peyrel, & Siegfried, 2018), but there are no indications that boarding schools like Salem play an outstanding role for elite reproduction in the German context, certainly not comparable to the role of their British counterparts. The current elites in Germany have neither attended boarding schools themselves to a high degree nor do they send their children preferentially to boarding school (see Hartmann, 2007). According to Hartmann (2002, p. 163), in Germany the important mechanisms of elite reproduction take place outside the education system.

Nevertheless, in the German system, too, a segment of more or less exclusive schools exists that seems to be especially attractive to the members of higher social classes, which in turn are massively overrepresented in German elite positions (Helsper, Bardamen, Kramer, Ziems, & Klug, 2008, p. 217). Salem belongs to this segment, which, however, comprises several hundreds of schools, the majority of which are state schools that do not charge fees. In contrast to the strongly hierarchical independent sector in the United Kingdom, internal hierarchies are weak within this segment (Helsper, 2006, p. 169).

In the German public debate on exclusive boarding schools, we found two conflicting discourses. These discourses are important to note in order to analyze the schools' formal structure. In the first discourse Salem is considered to be an elite school similar to the "Clarendon Nine" in the United Kingdom, paving the way to elite positions. For example, major newspapers refer to Salem as "the school of the German elites" (Reichwein, 2011) and according to Wikipedia, Salem "is considered one of the most elite schools in Europe" (Wikipedia, 2018). Even scholarly articles about boarding schools refer to these high-fee-charging schools as schools "where tomorrow's elite is educated" (Hammes, 2013) or designate Salem explicitly as an "elite school" (Tenorth, 2018, p. 9). As mentioned above, this discourse is not in accordance with empirical research on which schools actually produce elites.

In the opposing discourse, Schule Schloss Salem appears as a school for wealthy families and their offspring, where the parents' money can save their children's school career from failing. In this discourse, Salem offers rich kids with school problems a second chance and a way of by-passing the state sector. It secures the child's academic success and thereby access to higher education. This allegation is articulated frequently in many different publications, in journalistic books (e.g., Friedrichs, 2008) as well as in academic papers. Eberhard Reich (2008, p. 16) for example argues that the "escape" into an expensive boarding school, for safeguarding the family's social position, is only possible for the upper class.

A last important aspect is that in Germany, access to higher education is regulated more or less exclusively through school leaving exams (*Abitur*). Only the schools with a state accreditation are able to offer the *Abitur*. Accordingly, a school in Germany becomes unattractive for parents if the school risks this accreditation (e.g., by violating the norm of equal opportunities too obviously).

Theoretical Framework, Data and Method

The following section will present the theoretical framework, the data the argument is built on and the method of analysis used.

The Formal Structure of Organizations as Basis of Their Legitimacy

The article applies an analytic framework derived from neoinstitutionalist organizational sociology to conceptualize the need of organizations for legitimacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995). An important source of legitimacy, especially for organizations providing a service that is difficult to define or measure (such as education), lies in conforming to certain institutionalized "myths" structuring the organization's institutional environment. "Myths" are "institutionalized rules" or "prescriptions" (Meyer & Rowan, 1977, p. 343–344) that can be described as "symbolic accounts that tell us who we are, providing us with a sense of entitivity and a perspective on the world around us" (Ramirez, 2012, p. 429). "Meritocracy" and "equality of opportunity" can be seen as particularly important myths structuring education's institutional environment.

Neoinstitutionalist organizational theory postulates that an organization's formal structure, which the organization presents to its environment and with the help of which it legitimates itself, and the organization's actual mode of operation are only "loosely coupled" (Brunsson,

1989; Meyer & Rowan, 1977), meaning there can be significant differences and tensions between the organization's "public face" and its actual mode of operation. If these differences become too obvious, the organization's legitimacy is under threat. However, tensions can be disguised, e.g., by making the performance of the organization hard to measure, or neutralized, e.g., by arguing that there may be a gap between the formal structure and the actual mode of operation, but that the organization is actively working toward closing it in the future (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

In order to stay legitimate, schools thus need to appear to mirror the normative expectations of their environment, i.e., operate in accordance with the meritocratic norm and the principle of equality of opportunity. For schools producing social elites, this is particularly pressing, as the life chances distributed here tend to be particularly coveted and their allocation consequently is under strong legitimacy pressure. Loss of social legitimacy leads potentially to dire consequences for the schools, such as loss of financial benefits (cf. the recurrent discussion questioning the charitable status of British independent schools, see Department for Education, 2016; Weale, 2017) or even the threat of being abolished (cf. the ongoing campaign to abolish independent schools in the UK, which uses the twitter hashtag #abolisheton, see <https://twitter.com/AbolishEton>). At the same time, securing access to elite schools is attractive to parents wanting to give their children a competitive advantage. Thus, these schools are particularly interesting sites for studying how schools maintain social legitimacy while signaling to parents that investing in this type of education will pay off.

Data

The main empirical basis of the analysis presented here consists of the school prospectuses (including supplementary material such as admission booklets) produced by the two schools.¹ In addition, the analysis builds on the schools' official websites. School prospectuses are the "public face that schools present to prospective pupils" (Brooks & Waters, 2015b, p. 212) and their parents as well as to the public at large. Even though prospective pupils and their parents are the main target group, schools use the brochures not only to sell their exclusive product, but also to demonstrate compliance with the meritocratic expectations of their environment. Therefore, they are particularly well suited to studying the schools' formal structures.

The earliest brochure available in the archive of Eton College, which appears to be the first one produced by the school, dates from May 1959. The introduction of school brochures as such can perhaps be interpreted as an indication that the clientele of the school was widening at this time, making a more formalized "public face" necessary. At a time when Eton was mostly attended by pupils possessing a family connection to Old Etonians (which, as was mentioned above, even in 2012 was true for 40 per cent of the pupils attending Eton), a school brochure may have seemed less necessary. From 1959 to the present day, the school brochure was revised over and over again and its contents extended.

Schule Schloss Salem has been publishing brochures since its founding year (1920). As in the case of Eton, the school brochure was revised periodically and its contents extended. Today, in both cases, the brochures are highly polished, downloadable and backed by a website which also provides part of the school's "public face." In the case of Eton College, all school brochures published since 1959 have been included in the investigation. In the case of Schule Schloss Salem, all school brochures published since 1949 have been included in the investigation.

The main focus of the article is not historical but organizational-sociological. However, glimpses into the past serve to investigate whether the "public face" presented by the schools in the prospectuses has changed over time, whether and in which ways there was continuity and where

¹We would like to thank the archivists of Eton College and Schule Schloss Salem for granting access to the older school prospectuses in the respective schools' archives.

there were ruptures. This question is interesting because, as was mentioned above, there is reason to assume that the pressure on schools to demonstrate conformity with the “equality of opportunity”-norm and the meritocratic myth has intensified over the last decades. The empirical material shows a mixed picture here, however (see below).

Method

The material is analyzed with the help of a qualitative content analysis (QCA) according to Schreier (2012). QCA is particularly well suited for looking at selected aspects of material under a specific angle (rather than e.g., trying to create a holistic picture of a phenomenon as such, see Schreier, 2012, p. 7). QCA facilitates focusing on certain aspects of the data and also reduces the range of context that is to be taken into account to the aspects strictly relevant to the research question (Schreier, 2012, pp. 4, 7). The method is well suited for comparative research (Schreier, 2012, p. 42).

QCA employs a coding frame which is partly concept-driven and partly data-driven (Schreier, 2012, p. 41) and that is structured according to a number of main “dimensions” (i.e., main questions guiding the analysis, see Schreier, 2012, p. 59). The dimensions of the analysis presented here were (1) what the analyzed material says about admissions policy, (2) what the analyzed material says about the availability and awarding of scholarships and bursaries and (3) how schools try to persuade prospective pupils and their parents to choose the school.

Eton College and Schule Schloss Salem Compared

Admissions Policy: Emphasizing Meritocracy vs. Personal Impressions

Admission to Eton College is granted via different types of examination (see Eton College, 2018a, p. 2). The 2018/19 admissions booklet describes the character of the admission procedure in the following way:

Eton recruits a diverse intake of about 260 talented boys each year from a very wide range of schools worldwide. [...]. Eton’s aim is to encourage applications from candidates with as diverse a range of backgrounds as possible who meet the academic standard required for entry. Eton is committed to equal treatment of candidates regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, other protected characteristics or social backgrounds. [...] Eton is academically selective. (Eton College, 2018a, pp. 2, 3)

The booklet details the examination process required for admission and points to the different forms of financial support that are available. The website supplements the picture presented in the admissions booklet: “At the point when a boy is offered a place, his family’s financial background is not taken into account—the place is awarded on merit” (Eton College, 2018b).

Stressing that “Eton is academically selective,” that pupils come to Eton from a “very wide range of schools” and that admission is merit-based is supposed to underline that the privilege of an Eton education can be neither bought nor inherited and that Eton pupils may constitute an elite, but an elite based on *merit*.

Parts of the quote from the admissions booklet above read as if they had been directly transferred from the Equality Act passed in 2010 (e.g., speaking of “protected characteristics”), an act that in its very first section stipulates that public authorities in exercising their functions must “have due regard to the desirability of exercising them in a way that is designed to reduce the inequalities of outcome which result from socio-economic disadvantage” (Great Britain, 2010, s1, 1, 1).

Equality of opportunity is supposed to extend to disadvantages that are not primarily socio-economic. Since about the early 2000s, brochures underline that special educational needs such as dyslexia are being taken into consideration in the admission process. Eton’s website states that

“Eton is committed to supporting pupils with disabilities and also has a Learning Support team for boys with special educational needs” (Eton College, 2018b).

Before 1990, parents registered their son long before he had reached the age of 13 (often straight after birth) with a housemaster (i.e., head of a house, a sub-division of the school). Provided they passed the Common Entrance Examination, pupils would join that house on entering Eton. Around 1990 this was replaced by an interview and test-based admission procedure. The brochure for the school year of 2004/2005 remarks in this context: “An old system which allowed registration at birth has been replaced by a process of universal assessment.” Thus, according to the brochure, a particularist admission system based on personal relations was replaced by a rational, universalist procedure.

Thus, in its school brochures and through other channels Eton presents itself as being committed to meritocratic values in admission to the school. This self-presentation intensified over time, particularly from the mid-1970s on. This corroborates the assumption, discussed above, that the normative pressure to present the school as not being in conflict with the meritocratic norm has increased.

In contrast to Eton College, Schule Schloss Salem does not present itself as employing a primarily merit-based selection process. In the 2018 brochure, the school instead writes:

The selection criteria for the two academic programs differ in some ways and will be discussed individually with the student and his or her family. The personal impression made during the admission interview, however, is decisive. (Schule Schloss Salem, 2018, p. 27).

It is hardly possible to call this selection-process merit-based. Probably Salem is under less pressure to present their pupils as selected by merit because it is not as self-evident as it is in the English case that attending the school is a short cut to elite positions.

It is notable that in contrast to the Eton brochures, the meritocratic rhetoric becomes *weaker* rather than stronger over time in the Salem brochures. In the 1960s the school writes that applicants should at least satisfy the requirements for (state) higher secondary schools (the German *Gymnasium*) and that candidates have to pass an entry exam if their qualification is uncertain (see Schule Schloss Salem, 1969, p. 7). From the 1970s the school reduces this meritocratic rhetoric slowly.

Since, the question how educational opportunities and the access to exclusive schools is provided is a highly charged question in meritocratic societies, it does not seem plausible that the school risks its legitimacy for no reason. It is more likely that de-emphasizing merit when speaking about the selection process may constitute a trade off with the second challenge, i.e., attracting paying customers. In order to reconcile the conflicting demands and to deal with the tension, the school downplays the meritocratic norm. This is a way of keeping the door open for wealthy families with children who are not academic highfliers.

Availability of Scholarships and Selection of Recipients: Merit-based in Both cases

Eton College provides a number of scholarships and bursaries for pupils in need. In 2018, 21 per cent of boys received some form of financial support. 73 boys received a 100 percent reduction (Eton College, 2018b). Since the foundation of the school in the late Middle Ages (see Card, 2001), Eton has awarded scholarships to particularly able pupils. Originally, the school was supposed to enable 70 “poor scholars” to receive a free education. Only in the second half of the 19th century were the public schools—including Eton College—“privatised” and their system of financing based on fees (Shrobbree, 1988). To this day, 70 pupils receive the status of a “King’s Scholar” or “Colleger” on the basis of an examination; this is connected to a reduction of the school fees by 10 per cent and a means-tested bursary if needed.

Over the course of the time period analyzed here, Eton increasingly established scholarships for a clientele that through its social background was not predestined for attending a public school. The “scholarship ladder” offered by Eton starts on the level of preparatory school (i.e., fee-paying private schools preparing for independent school). The brochure for 1973/1974 mentions the “Junior Scholarships” for the first time (on this category of scholarship see also Card, 1994). Not only did these scholarships support boys attending Eton, but also the (private) preparatory schooling leading up to Eton. The brochure for the school year 1988/1989 mentions the “Sixth-Form-Scholarships” for the first time. These are supposed to enable particularly able pupils from the state school sector to attend the Sixth Form at Eton. In the school brochure on Sixth Form Scholarships, the school makes explicit the connection to its original mission of providing support for the able, but needy. The most recent addition in this category of scholarships are the “New Foundation Scholarships,” which were first mentioned in the brochure for the school year of 2007/2008. Their target group are very academically able pupils who have not been to a private preparatory school and whose families cannot afford Eton’s school fees.

In its school brochures Schule Schloss Salem points out that pupils should not be prevented from attending the school by financial circumstances. The school provides scholarships for “nearly one-quarter” (Schule Schloss Salem, 2018, p. 27) of its students. Unlike pupils admitted through the regular admission process, scholarship holders face high demands. The school writes: “Good academic performance is a pre-requisite for a successful application for financial aid. But, ultimately, the decision will be made on the basis of the student’s character: Scholarship recipients place high demands on themselves and are willing to put their skills and knowledge to the service of others” (Schule Schloss Salem, 2018, p. 27). The basic grant amounts to 500€ per month, which makes the school cheaper to attend, but not cheap. Depending on the family’s financial situation, higher grants are available. The school finances the scholarship program via donations from alumni and from parents who are willing and able to pay an extra fee.

With regard to the tension between the meritocratic norm and parents’ desire to give their children a head start, the scholarships have a variety of effects. For both schools they are a way to show the environment that the school is open to families with a lower income, and that the school commits itself to social justice in the form of meritocracy and equality of opportunity. For Schule Schloss Salem, stressing that one quarter of pupils receive a merit-based scholarship is furthermore a reply to the second discourse discussed above: it appeases the fears of parents of prospective pupils that Schule Schloss Salem is just a collecting tank for underachievers. Finally, donating money to the scholarship program can be seen as a way of making sure the symbolic value of a Salem education does not decrease. Alumni may see making a donation to their former school as a way of retroactively safeguarding the value of their education.

Attracting the Prospective Clientele: Advertising Exclusivity and High Academic Requirements—Internationality/Internationalism

Eton College’s privileged role in elite reproduction is common knowledge among potential “customers,” and the school is in high demand. In other words, the social exchange value of an Eton education is well known. Therefore, it is plausible to assume that Eton College does not have to invest into attracting parents and pupils in the same active manner as Schule Schloss Salem.

When presenting the school to the outside world, Eton College highlights certain aspects of the school program, the high demands the school’s education places on pupils and the school’s exclusivity. The school emphasizes its high academic standards, the excellent learning conditions and the academic support available for ambitious boys. The brochures state that the school’s aims exceed those of the public examinations for which it prepares pupils: “The aim of our teaching and our expectation goes some way beyond public examination courses” (Eton College, 2018c,

p. 5). The school's exclusivity and its distinction potential is manifest in many different parts of the brochures, for example by mentioning the "rich cultural environment" presented by the school: "Boys have an exceptional range of libraries, museums and other resources upon which to draw, including a remarkable collection of rare books and manuscripts from the time of the foundation to the present day. Etonians live and work in a rich cultural environment" (Eton College, 2018c, p. 5).

Concerning pupils' achievements, the school writes: "our pupils consistently achieve excellent results in all areas of the curriculum, giving them access to the top universities in the UK and overseas (Eton College, 2018c, p. 4). The admission booklet reports that a large number of pupils apply to Oxford and Cambridge and that "it is not unusual for 80 or more places to be offered altogether in any year" (Eton College, 2018a, p. 11).

Exam results and university placements can be seen as part of the currency in which "institutionalized merit" (Kett, 2013) is expressed. Reporting success in this currency reinforces the self-presentation of the school as a producer of an elite of merit possibly more effectively than stressing access to elite positions would do. It is possible that the brochures of Eton College do not contain information about the fact that many of the school's alumni attain elite positions for this reason. If it is true that parents and pupils choose the school partly because it facilitates access to elite positions, it may seem surprising that the school misses this selling point. However, given that the high social exchange value of an Eton education is so well known, it is possible that the school does not have to Labor this point explicitly, especially when doing so may lead to questions about Eton's commitment to the normative ideas of selection by merit and equal opportunities.

In its brochures Schule Schloss Salem also highlights the benefits of a Salem education on different levels. On the level of teaching, the school highlights pedagogical aspects such as small class size, highly-qualified teaching staff, individual support and high standards. "Excellent, internationally oriented academic instruction is provided by a highly-qualified teaching staff in a first-class learning environment. Focus is placed on the individual student" (Schule Schloss Salem, 2018, p. 7). On the level of extracurricular education the school focuses e.g., on its career-counselling program, its sports program and its commitment to "Education for taking responsibility" (see below), which is practically implemented in the form of community service. In addition to this, the school emphasizes the socialization the children receive in the exclusive and international environment the school offers. The school presents itself as a paragon of internationalization and as one of the leading schools offering the IB. "Salem's internationally minded student and teacher body offers a lively and intercultural experience. It serves as an ideal preparation for the future's globalized life and work environments" (Schule Schloss Salem, 2000, p. 26). Salem has been stressing its internationality continuously over the last two decades, considering it an outstanding characteristic of the school. It is notable that internationality functions as a mark of quality in the field of exclusive schools (see Helsper et al., 2008, p. 219) and of higher education in Germany (see Bloch, Mitterle, & Peter, 2016, p. 727). Eton College, in contrast, underlines its Britishness and to a certain extent downplays its internationality, despite the fact that it has high numbers of international pupils. "Most of our boys are drawn from the length and breadth of the United Kingdom, and smaller numbers come from all around the world" (Eton College, 2018c, p. 11). Eton's Britishness is an important selling point. Regardless of the high numbers of international pupils, the school has to present itself as British in order to protect its attraction for a British as well as an international clientele (this finding is very much in line with Brooks & Waters, 2015b).

As the school's core concept and pedagogical aim Salem stresses "education for taking responsibility" (*Verantwortung*) frequently in all its brochures (on the the concept of "Verantwortung" in exclusive school contexts see Gibson, 2017; Kalthoff, 1997). Linked to this, Salem talks about its pupils and graduates not as an academic elite but as an elite in taking

responsibility (see Schule Schloss Salem, 2008, p. 5). This self-description is relevant in multiple ways for the argument presented here. First, the rhetoric suggests consensus with norms and beliefs prevalent in the environment while protecting the organization from critical questions, since nobody can reasonably oppose the claim that schools should teach pupils to take responsibility. Secondly, with this concept the school creates a product which can be described as an alternative form of merit (on the benefits of defining alternative forms of merit see Khan, 2011, p. 174). While this product can still connect to the meritocratic myth, it is simultaneously much more difficult to evaluate or to measure than academic merit. Thirdly, the slogan “Education for taking responsibility” fits in both discourses discussed above. It appeals to parents who are searching for an education preparing their child for elite positions; and it also appeals to wealthy families with children who are not academic highflyers and have problems in school.

But Schule Schloss Salem also uses the success of its alumni as a selling point. Sometimes, this is done in a fairly general way, e.g., when the brochure states “it is not surprising that Salem’s graduates are accepted at top universities worldwide” (Schule Schloss Salem, 2008, p. 46). Mostly this information is presented in an incidental way or in the form of short personal stories. In many of these stories the school highlights that the alumni attended a British or an American university. The distinctive value of referring to top universities in Britain or the US is higher than referring to German universities since the German university system still operates to a large degree under the premise of the equality of all universities (Deppe, Helsper, Krüger, & Stock, 2015). Like in the following quote from the current scholarship brochure, the alumni’s career-boosting experience in Salem is highlighted: “At the end of secondary school, the IB and my excellent knowledge of English opened the doors for studying at Oxford University in the UK. Without the IB, I believe I would have had neither the aspiration to go to such an elite university nor the required self confidence for the application process” (Schule Schloss Salem, 2016, p. 4). A high number of alumni attending British and American universities seems to function as a measure for success in both Eton College and Schule Schloss Salem. With this the school provides a discreet assurance of success to the parents of prospective pupils.

In contrast to Eton College, Schule Schloss Salem openly disparages competitors and shows parents therefore not just what to choose, but also what *not* to choose. State schools are criticized as organizations without comprehensive educational proposals, limited to knowledge transfer (see Schule Schloss Salem, 2000, p. 10; incidentally, this criticism connects to a wider strand of criticism in the German educational debate. See for example Precht, 2013). Competing boarding schools are disparaged as well, such as in the following statement: “Salem is not a university-preparatory school like most of the English and American boarding schools. Salem is a life-preparatory school” (Schule Schloss Salem, 2008, p. 12). This assertion echoes Salem’s roots in the “progressive” movement of the early 20th century, of which its founder Kurt Hahn was a prominent member (Oelkers, 2014).

It is notable that both schools claim to maintain high academic standards in order to highlight the school’s meritocratic character. It seems possible that high requirements inside a school can lead to the self-perception as an elite of merit, regardless of the non-meritocratic admission process and the fact that most pupils’ parents pay a large amount of money for their child to have the chance to attend this school. But claiming to produce an elite based on merit is much more than an ideological smokescreen hiding the “true” character of what is going on inside the school. Ethnographic research in several exclusive school settings has shown that stressing the merit-based character of the schools is not just important for exclusive schools’ presentation on the level of their presentation to the outside world, but also for the *self*-perception of pupils and teachers (see Kalthoff, 1997; Khan, 2011). In this context, it is important to note that merit is, in most cases, conceptualized as *individual* merit, obscuring social and structural inequalities (Solga,

2005, p. 28; Verheyen, 2018). This individualist conception of merit is a requirement to uncouple the pupil's self-perception from their parents' payments.

Conclusion

This article has sought to come to grips with the “double challenge” faced by two exclusive boarding schools, Eton College (England) and Schule Schloss Salem (Germany): the challenge on the one hand of maintaining social legitimacy in a social world in which the norms of meritocracy and equality of opportunity are very strong while, on the other hand, of staying attractive for a clientele willing to pay high fees for an “exclusive” education. The article has done so by studying the “public face” (Brooks & Waters, 2015b, p. 212) these schools present to their environments. Our analysis has shown that how the two schools meet the double challenge differs in significant ways that are to a large part determined by the different functional logics of the English and German patterns of elite formation and the role played by educational institutions in elite formation and reproduction and the differing popular perceptions of the schools and their relationship to the education system as a whole.

The comparison between the two schools' “public faces” has enabled us to observe a tradeoff between demonstrating conformity with the wider social norm of meritocracy under the conditions of equality of opportunity on the one hand and the need to appeal to paying customers on the other:

Eton College's high visibility and outstanding status seem to place the school under particular pressure to stress its commitment to the ideals of meritocracy and equality of opportunity, a pressure that even seems to intensify over the last few decades, particularly since the early 1970s. This commitment to meritocratic norms on the level of the school's formal structure affects all analyzed aspects of the school's self-presentation. On the other hand, the social exchange value of an Eton education is well established among the school's potential clientele and the school therefore does not have to be as proactive in attracting parents as Schule Schloss Salem. Instead, Eton can present itself as a stronghold of meritocracy, which in turn further enhances the symbolic value of attending the school and of being an Old Etonian.

Schule Schloss Salem does not seem to be under the same kind of pressure to stress its adherence to the meritocratic norm. While the school stresses the meritocratic character of its classes and its awarding of scholarships, the brochures disregard this in particular when it comes to the question of admission. In contrast to Eton, the meritocratic rhetoric even decreases over time. We argue that one reason for Salem being able to present the school in this way lies in the fact that attending the school is not generally viewed as a fast track into elite positions in the German context. Hence, it is not as pressing to present the school's pupils as having been selected on the basis of merit. On the other hand, this increases the saliency of the second aspect of the tension mentioned above for the school: Schule Schloss Salem is under more pressure to show parents of prospective pupils that the school is the right choice and that their investment will pay off in the long run.

This study has focused on the schools' “public face,” i.e., the stories the schools tell their *environments* about themselves. Building on work done by Khan (2011), Kalthoff (1997) and others, it would be interesting to link this analysis more comprehensively than has been possible here to the stories the schools tell *themselves about themselves*, i.e., how teachers and pupils (and alumni) on a day-to-day basis make sense of the fact that they are working and learning in an “exclusive” environment that nevertheless is supposed to be governed by the norms of meritocracy and equality of opportunity.

It would also be highly interesting to extend the analysis to other schools in other contexts with yet different functional logics. In the light of our analysis, it seems likely that all exclusive schools charging fees situated in an environment that subscribes to the meritocratic myth will be

faced with a “double challenge” of the kind Eton and Schloss Salem are facing. However, this is ultimately an empirical question.

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