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‘Elite’ and ‘excellence’ from the perspective of young people and their peers at exclusive schools

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Abstract: Against the backdrop of the recent political discourse on elite and excellence in the German education system, this article examines how such constructions manifest themselves in programmatic concepts of schools and in the orientations of their pupils and their peers. These orientations are reconstructed on the basis of a qualitative research project on educational careers of young people. The article focuses on pupils and their peers at an elite school of sports and an international school. Firstly, the state of research on those types of school as well as on educational careers of their pupils will be presented. Secondly, the theoretical references and the methodological design of the study will be introduced. At the core of the paper is the analysis of the educational orientations of selected cases of young people and their peers: How do they position themselves towards the concepts of elite and excellence in their individual and collective orientations and how is this relevant for processes of distinction and coherence-building in the groups? In the last part of the paper, the results will be summarised and related to the state of research and the scientific discourse on elite and excellence.

Keywords: Elite, Excellence, Distinction, Elite schools, International schools

The concepts 'elite' and 'excellence' after having long been marginal in Germany or even taboo, have become key categories in the German educational discussion over the past decade (Ecarius & Wigger 2006).¹ The concept of 'excellence' in both policy-making and scientific discourse is often associated with the outstanding performance and ability of individuals or relevant institutions (Maaz et al. 2009; Ricken 2009). In contrast, 'elite' is viewed differently depending on the political stance or the theoretical perspective adopted, either as a status achieved by successful performance in meritocratic competition, or as an inherited position in the social hierarchy associated to inequality (Hoffmann-Lange 2003; Hartmann 2013). Although, or perhaps because, both terms are ambiguous, in the past decade they have not only had a key influence on educational policy semantics, but discussions about them have also been accompanied by far-reaching transformations of the German education system. Over the past ten years there has been an enormous increase in differentiation in the sector of higher secondary education, combined with processes of vertical differentiation (Krüger et al. 2012b).

In our research project we not only investigate the educational careers and peer cultures of young people attending four upper-secondary schools, mainly *gymnasiums*², with differing claims to exclusivity (an International School, a so-called Elite School of Sport', and two schools with different aesthetic profiles), but we also consider whether and how such educational policy semantics and social constructions of 'elite' and 'excellence' can be detected in school-cultural programmes and in the orientation patterns of young people and their groups of friends, i.e. their peers.³ Our previous institutional analyses have shown that only the head teacher of the Elite School of Sport was able to relate to a concept of 'elite' unhesitatingly and affirmatively, because his school has had to maintain its status as an elite school of sport for more than a decade in competition with the other Elite Schools of Sport in Germany. The head teacher of the International School, in contrast, places alongside cultural concepts such as *lifelong learning* and the promotion of *world citizenship* the concept of *academic excellence* at the centre of the school's programmatic self presentation, which also emphasises the preparation for attending outstanding international universities. In contrast, the head teachers of the two other schools with an aesthetic profile referred more to the promotion of talent and abilities, and barely touched on the educational policy discourse on 'elite' and 'excellence' (for details see Krüger et al. 2015). Since in particular the young people at the sports school and at the international School did refer explicitly to this discourse, we will concentrate mainly on these in the following.

1. Research on Elite Schools of Sport and International Schools in Germany

Early in the 1990s, the Elite Schools of Sport were introduced as successor institutions to the Children and Youth Sports Schools in the German Democratic Republic. In 2013 there were 41 of these schools in Germany in various forms (DOSB 2013a). They are frequently combined with a boarding school. More than 11,500 students attend Elite Schools of Sport, and nearly two thirds of them are selected cadre athletes of sports associations; 8.6 percent are national cadres at top sport level (Emrich et al. 2008a, p. 69). In 2012, out of 392 members of the German Olympic team, 104 had been to an Elite School of Sport (DOSB 2013a). These schools see themselves, according to the official definition of the German Olympic Sports Confederation, as a 'special school which ensures with a cooperative combination of high-performance sport, school, and living that talented young athletes will continue to be able to prepare themselves for top levels of performance in sport while maintaining their educational opportunities' (DOSB 2013b).

In our research project, references to 'elite' and 'excellence' have already been investigated from an institutional perspective, primarily on the basis of the analysis of interviews with head teachers (Krüger et al. 2015). The 'elite' concept is associated by the head teacher of the sports school with sporting elites: *"Elite here means related to sport [...] talented children who can then develop themselves further and [...] can develop their strengths up to the highest success"* (interview, lines 778-780). Here, 'elite' is linked to the societal field of sports and related to sporting success, requiring high levels of performance. An orientation towards a functional understanding of 'elite' can be identified (Hoffmann-Lange 2003). In contrast, the head teacher finds the concept of 'excellence' less appropriate for his institution (interview, line 783).

A considerable amount of research on the Elite Schools of Sport in Germany has focused on the institutions themselves. Quantitatively based evaluation studies have examined the sports schools in particular in terms of the dimensions of sporting success and the educational qualifications achieved by students in comparison with other schools (Emrich et al. 2007, 2008a, b). For example, Emrich et al. (2008a, p. 73) show that students of Elite Schools of Sport do not differ from other students in terms of levels of sporting success. Also with relation to academic qualifications there are no differences compared to students who did not attend such a school. However, it was found that students attending sports schools were less likely to go on to higher education than students at other schools and more likely to seek occupations within the police or the armed forces. However, in view of the lack of long-term studies it was not possible to investigate whether they went on to higher education at a later stage (ibid).

The quantitative cohort study by Conzelmann et al. (2001) focused on the long-term personality development of individual participants in the Olympic Games and their education and occupations. Among other things researchers were able to demonstrate that high-performance sportsmen and

sportswomen in comparison with the general public have a higher level of education and extend their education beyond the usual duration, and that former top athletes are occupationally very successful and are frequently self-employed or have academic professions (see also Borggreffe et al. 2009).

There are also quantitatively based studies of the Elite Schools of Sport or of elite education systems in terms of the education and training of sport elites. Among these, many include internal comparisons for instance an international comparison of ten countries (Radtke & Coalter 2007), a comparative study of Germany and France (Braun 1999) and a comparative study of Germany, France, and Switzerland (Faure & Suaud 2009). However, there has been little research on the peers of young high-performance sports students. One exception is the study of Kreuzer (2006), who examined the careers of young footballers in the context of family, schools, peers, and high-performance sport.

The number of International Schools is increasing all over the world, in particular in economically strong regions. Koinzer & Leschinsky (2009) noted the existence of some 50 International Schools in Germany, whereas the Association of German International Schools (AGIS 2017) currently has 24 members. In addition there are a few international school models that are state organised, e.g. Europa schools or Unesco Project Schools. Nevertheless, despite their expansion, there has only been limited research on International Schools in German-speaking countries. Hornberg (2010) provided one of the first comprehensive overviews of the development, educational objectives, organisational forms and curricula of these schools (see also Hallwirth 2013).

Our research project focuses among other things on the institutional dimension of International Schools (Keßler et al. 2013). For the head teacher of the International School, 'excellence' is a central point of reference, in contrast to the self-representation of the sports school: "*educational excellence [...] I think it's again something that lots of systems can or should aim for*" (interview, lines 512-513). The school, with a long tradition in the region, sees itself as making the city in which it is located more attractive for relocating international companies (ibid., lines 112f.). The head teacher shows ambivalence regarding the term 'elite'. Provided it is not adopted in a socially excluding way, 'elite' means for him something that everybody should strive for (ibid., lines 509-510).

There is a lack of empirical research on International Schools and their students in German-speaking countries. An exception is the study by Köhler (2012) of the daily lives of 12- to 14-year-old students of an International School in Germany and a German School in Japan from a micro-sociological perspective, focusing on their peer relationships. In English-speaking countries the research situation is very different. Since the 1990s, in particular Hayden and Thompson have been conducting studies about the worldwide landscape of International Schools (Hayden 2011; Hayden & Thompson 2008) as well as their curricula and goals (Hayden & Thompson 2011a, b, 2012). In addition, they have used

questionnaires to investigate the experience of the students (Hayden & Thompson 1995, 1997; Hayden et al. 2000; Wilkinson & Hayden 2010) and the teachers (Hayden & Thompson 1998; Hayden et al. 2000). For the respondents the acquisition of an internationally compatible final qualification offering access to higher education was a central goal, which indicates a very pragmatic orientation (Hayden & Thompson 1998, p. 553). “Being international” is associated by interviewees with characteristics such as “international mindedness”, “second language competence”, “flexibility of thinking”, or “respect for others” (Hayden et al. 2000, p. 109f.).

There have been a few studies of other areas. One of them is a quantitative study by Kanan & Baker (2006), who asked students at International and state schools in Qatar about how they saw their educational and occupational future. Another is an investigation by Song (2013) who studied International Schools in South Korea.⁴

Thus, while various dimensions relating to the Elite Schools of Sport and International Schools have been studied closely, there have been few long-term studies such as the one by Conzelmann et al. 2001 and the role of peers has only been touched on (Kreutzer 2006; Köhler 2012). In addition, until recently, there have been no investigations of how social actors at these institutions negotiate concepts such as ‘elite’ and ‘excellence’.

2. Theoretical references and research design of the qualitative study

The selected results we present are drawn from the first investigation phase of a larger study in which we analyse in particular the educational careers of young people and the processes of distinction and coherence among friendship groups at four German higher secondary schools, of which we focus here on the Elite School of Sport and the International School. In this context, we investigate the individual and collective educational orientations of the young people and their peers through the study of friendship dyads or groups. But we also consider how they relate in their individual or collective orientations to the topics of ‘elite’ and ‘excellence’ and what role such semantics play in distinction and coherence forming processes.

For the analysis, we adopt a praxeological theory approach drawing on the cultural theory of Bourdieu (1990) and developing this further microanalytically and in terms of action theory (Mehan et al. 1996; Bohnsack 2003; Reckwitz 2004; Reay 2004). The genesis of the habitual individual and of the collective orientations of young people is not explained by inherited capital but in terms of milieu-specific layers of experience and in the context of socialisation interactions in the family, the school and the peer world (Bohnsack 2003, p. 68). We show that in the collective actions of peer groups, processes of social distinction and coherence formation are interconnected and can be at the same time characterised by the search for a habitual fit and processes of distinction (Bohnsack 2003; Krüger et al. 2012a).

In order to be able to investigate the complexity of the topic and the elite and excellence semantics, we resorted primarily to a qualitative methodological approach. In addition to school documents and interviews with head teachers, we draw mainly on qualitative interviews with 16-year-old young people and group discussions with their peers. In addition, we carried out a quantitative survey of tenth graders in order to obtain information about the social composition of the school, the school performance status, the nature of peer networks and the leisure activities of students⁵ and at the same time to identify a contrasting sample of students for the qualitative interviews.

Using relevant criteria for our study we chose 56 interesting young people for biographical interviews, of which twelve were from the sports school, 17 from the International School and the others from the two other schools. After an initial biographical section, the interview guide focused on educational aspirations, aspects of distinction and coherence as well as on the 'elite' and 'excellence' notions, first implicitly (asking the students what was special about their school) and then explicitly.

After an initial evaluation of the qualitative interviews, we chose 15 young people on the basis of the principles of minimum and maximum contrast, of which five were from the Elite School of Sport and five from the International School. We conducted group discussions with them and their friends. These were started with an open question about what they do when spending time together and there was also an additional questions section in which the academic expectations of the group members were addressed as well as commonalities within the group and differences with respect to other groups and with respect to the notions of 'elite' and 'excellence'.

The analysis of the qualitative interviews and group discussions were conducted using the documentary method (Bohnsack et al. 2010; Nohl 2006). This makes it possible to reconstruct empirically the communicative knowledge about educational expectations of the interviewees and their uses of the notions of 'elite' and 'excellence'. In addition, the individual and collective orientation frameworks were studied as fundamental attitudes of the actors against the background of their position in conjunctive experiential spaces. The processes of educationally-related social distinction and coherence formation were also similarly explored (Krüger 2011). By triangulation of the results of the analysis of the interviews and groups discussions, we were able to check the extent to which the individual orientations of the young people and the collective orientation of their friends on the topics of 'elite' and 'excellence' coincide.

3. Educational careers, distinction and coherence processes in peer groups at an Elite School of Sport and an International School

The following section presents selected students from the Elite School of Sport and the International School, and their peers. The focus is in particular on their discursive constructions of 'elite' and

'excellence'. Starting with an example, the central individual and collective orientations of the young people and their peers are presented and two contrasting cases are considered for each school.

3.1 Educational careers, high-performance sport and identification with concepts of 'elite'

In the following, we present three students from the Elite School of Sport and their friends. Katharina Richter has a pragmatic but successful approach to education and ambitious goals for her sporting career. Philipp Wetzel, also a top athlete, aims to satisfy the school's academic requirements but without greater aspirations. Thirdly, Alana Vogt now pursues recreational sport at the Elite School of Sport and shows insecure academic endeavours (Kramer & Helsper 2010).

Katharina Richter

Fifteen-year-old Katharina Richter has played football since second grade and now attends the seventh grade at the sport school. She comes from an academic family context. Katharina's daily life is dominated by and structured around football. The dominance of sport is shown by the priority Katharina places on her sporting career. Her narration indicates high enaction potential when it comes to furthering this in a success-oriented way. Katharina currently plays in the German U 16 national football team. But she never mentions any problems concerning limitations on her leisure time: *"well [...] I do my sport [...] what other people do for fun in their free time, I do as top performance sport that is important and where I make an effort [...] and go on training runs at the weekend"* (interview, lines 878-881). She emphasises the importance of team spirit. But this is not explained in terms of community orientation. She associates fairness and sporting behaviour with the possibility of winning a game, because all the team members have to contribute to the success. Competitive attitudes and individualism are a hindrance.

Katharina's school performance is at a consistently high level. She regards herself as a successful student and here too she shows enaction potential for obtaining good and very good results. However, she does not show broad academic interests. She shows a pragmatic attitude to high levels of academic performance without the goal of achieving best performance at all times. This reflects the fact that she attaches more importance to her sporting career than to her school career. Katharina's plans for the future are also oriented towards her sporting career. She wants to go to university, but she is vague about what subject she wants to study there. The most important thing is that she is able to combine it with her football career.

Katharina associates the concept of 'elite' with two things. Firstly, she associates it with a status depending on school actors and their individual efforts. Sporting success in particular, but also school achievements and behaviour adapted to the norms and rules of the institution are key for her in

order to be able to qualify as an elite school: *“it’s okay in my grade because they have all left, but we had real trouble-makers and also some who just didn’t belong at our school so that you really couldn’t say that we were an elite school”* (interview, lines 510-514). In particular she criticises the recreational athletes who are not sufficiently serious about sport and those who are not able to combine school and sport well. She understands the concept of ‘elite’ as relating to the special sporting support the school provides for her: *“we are supported more, that’s right, above all when it comes to sport”* (interview, lines 548-549). Since she performs well or very well both academically and in sports and also receives special support for sport, Katharina sees herself as belonging to the elite and having a special status: *“elite, I’d say that applies for me because things are working out well at the moment in sport [...] I have always produced performance and have always tried to keep up at school”* (interview, lines 565-568). In her view, the term ‘elite’ associates excellence with top sporting performance.

Katharina’s individual orientations match very closely the collective orientations of her peer group, which is a gender-mixed and fluid peer network. The young members of this group are active in different sports and their school performance varies. Their shared activities are limited to boarding school life. With regard to school, the girls are markedly success-oriented, whereas the boys have much lower school aspirations. Despite these divergent orientations they show a collective scholastic ethos, which can be described as a pragmatic view of their “student job” (Breidenstein 2006). The school is subordinated to sport and is treated more as a peripheral topic. In the group there is an orientation to top sporting performance, which matches very closely Katharina’s individual orientation to success. Her peers link sport to discipline, self-assertion, and personal dedication, with a high expectation with regard to their sporting careers. Being able to attend the Elite School of Sport is seen as a privilege: *“it’s somehow special just to be here because there aren’t many who have the honour to go to this sports school”* (group discussion, lines 2326-2327). To be accepted by the school also means to belong to an ‘elite’. The label of the school is presented with pride to the outside world. In order to maintain the status of the school these students attempt to emulate the successes of former students. Striving for top sporting achievements in this way implies a distinction from the recreational athletes.

Philipp Wetzel

Philipp Wetzel is 16 years old and came to the sports school right after primary school. He is from a middle-class social milieu. Sport also dominates Philipp’s daily life, and he even refers to his leisure time as training time. Philipp has been active in tracks and fields since an early age and is currently one of the top athletes of his age group in Germany. Philipp’s orientation to performance and success is documented in particular by the fact that he regards the recreational athletes at his school

as a disturbance, and criticises those in his age group who do not spend their leisure time on activities and things which he regards as meaningful. When talking about sport he repeatedly uses combative metaphors, which are indicators of a competitive attitude. Philipp is of the opinion that superiority and self-assertion are central attributes that you need to succeed.

For Philipp, school is a marginal topic; his grades are mostly average. He also attaches more importance to his sports career than to his academic work. In contrast to Katharina, Philipp does not aim for high scholastic achievements. School for him consists mainly in a relationship network. This orientation to performance can be seen after Breidenstein (2006) as him doing his “student job” with minimum effort to achieve maximum possible success. Philipp distances himself from keen and eager students.

While Katharina and her peer group link their concept of ‘elites’ both to the status of their school and to the sporting support they receive, Philipp distances himself from the elite status of his school. The 16-year-old refers to the shortage of top athletes and the failure of teachers to understand that sport is a priority compared with school. However, at the same time, Philipp recognises the support given by the school in the form of allowing students longer time to complete their schooling. Philipp also defines ‘elite’ in terms of attributes such as strength and physical superiority, and combines this with the perception of belonging to the top performers. Here too there are lines of distinction, since the elite construction involves the exclusion of those who are not ‘elite’. The term ‘excellence’ was not taken up by Philipp.

Philipp’s individual orientation in terms of the need to obtain a final school qualification is highly conformant with that of his peer group. There are performance differences between the group members, but for all of them the school functions more as a meeting place. However, there are divergences with regard to sports careers and Philipp’s orientation in terms of success and performance. Whereas Philipp sees himself as a top athlete and individually distances himself from the recreational athletes at the school, one of the group members plays recreational sport himself. Philipp’s criticism of the school because of a lack of top athletes would probably have a disruptive effect if expressed in the group. The situation is similar for the term ‘elite’. In the group discussion it is denigrated and used ironically, whereas in Philipp’s individual orientation it was possible to identify a strong personal identification with the term ‘elite’ and with promoting top sporting performance.

Alana Vogt

In contrast to Katharina and Philipp, Alana Vogt associates rowing with enjoyment and she has come to regard it as a leisure activity. She is 16 years old and has attended the sports schools since the seventh grade. She comes from an academic family context. Alana’s central orientation is one of

community and coherence, in particular with regard to close peer relationships. It is within this framework that she deals with the topics of school and sport.

Alana began rowing at the age of ten years. However, she gave up her aim of becoming a top athlete after four years due to problems with weight and academic results. Apart from recreational rowing, Alana is variously active and uses sport mainly as a way of meeting other young people. Similarly, she also sees the school less as an educational institution and more as a place for making friendships. Alana finds learning difficult, and has to invest time and effort into doing homework. She is already nervous about the school leaving examinations at the end of year twelve, so that her educational orientation can be regarded as insecure striving.

Although the 16-year-old belongs to the group of recreational athletes at the sports school, she can still identify with the concept of 'elite'. She associates this, like Katharina, on the one hand with the top sporting performances of other students and on the other hand with the support provided for sport by the school. She characterises the elite school by reference to the sport dimension and not in terms of academic performance. Alana does not specifically refer to 'excellence'.

In the group discussion with her best friend Clara, a divergence is documented regarding academic aspirations. Clara has academic ambitions and in this context positions the school as necessary to obtain an appropriate qualification. These divergent orientations are avoided by the young people, however, because school is only a peripheral topic in their group. With regard to the construction of 'elites', however, the dyad shares a homologous orientation framework. Both Alana and Clara are aware of the school myth and regard the students who are top athletes as a sporting elite. They are aware of the external perception of the label, and are proud of this. At the same time, they feel at a disadvantage as hobby athletes within the school because they are regarded by the other students and the teachers as "makeweights" and "water carriers".

All these young people and their peers implicitly draw on a functional concept of a sport elite. Their elitist understanding is based on an individualist view of performance, which they associate above all with personal dedication, success and professionalism. 'Elite' is generated not by academic, social or economic resources and achievements, but rather in the context of top sporting performance. The top athletes Katharina and Philipp therefore establish clear distinction lines between themselves and those who regard sport as a hobby or recreational activity. Their orientation in terms of performance and success in their sporting career is in contrast to pursuing a particular sport only as a hobby or leisure activity. Apart from this, the three students have coherent views about the promotion of a sporting elite at the school. The dominance of sport and the support for the sporting elite gives the school a distinctive profile in comparison with other higher secondary schools.

However, there is divergence with regard to its status as an elite school. While Katharina and Alana agree with this label and associate it with the top athletes at the school, Philipp distances himself from this institutional labelling and criticises the limited numbers of top sporting performers. His radical attitude meets with divergence in his peer group. In contrast, there are coherent points of reference between Katharina and Alana and their peer groups. All these young people are aware of the external perception of the elite status of their school and appreciate the respect shown to them and the prestige they enjoy as a result. However, while Katharina and her peer group value a collective distinction between themselves and the hobby and leisure athletes, Alana and her girlfriend are negatively affected by this exclusion mechanism within the school.

3.2 Educational careers of students at the International School and their rejection of its reputation as the ‘rich kids’ school’

We now consider three students at the International School and their peers. Charlotte Marten, a young, locally-based German, has a strategic orientation to academic success with a functional understanding of ‘elite’. In contrast, Gwyn Cordalis shows an orientation towards excellence and perfection within the framework of all-round learning, extending far beyond the school itself. Rebekka Weinstein on the other hand emphasises the supportive character of the school for students with transnational experience and shows moderate academic endeavour.

Charlotte Marten

Seventeen-year-old Charlotte has attended the International School since fifth grade. At one point she left and spent two years at a boarding school, but after being bullied there she moved back to the International School in the eighth grade. Her parents were born in Germany and separated when she was four years old. Since then Charlotte has lived with her mother, but says she still has close ties to her father. He owns a company and wants his daughter to take this over as soon as possible. Her mother works in a fashion shop. Charlotte’s passion is horse riding, and she has her own horse to which she is devoted. This and other expensive activities such as visits to clubs or celebrating her 18th birthday on the up-market island of Sylt suggest a high-level of economic capital in the family.

With regard to school, this young person shows high levels of self-assertion. Charlotte emphasises that she is able to improve her school performance when she really wants to. Her school exertions are dependent on external factors. She was motivated to achieve best marks while at the boarding school because her parents had promised to reward her with her own horse. And she was working to obtain the International Baccalaureate (IB) because she felt this would be helpful for getting a university place abroad: *“when I went to the boarding school I think that was my high-point. Because I really wanted the horse [...] but like I say it all depends, I need a motivation and now for example I*

am taking the IB next year and that is naturally for me such a motivation as well" (interview, lines 132f.). Charlotte demonstrates a very relaxed attitude about academic performance, but this transforms into a strategic endeavour as soon as this will allow her to achieve her personal goals and her wishes for the future. She regards being able to attend the International School as a privilege, because in addition to providing comprehensive education it also offers a final qualification which opens up the best opportunities for her to study outside Germany. In this context, she views herself as a world citizen.

As a student at the International School, Charlotte is confronted with the perceptions of outsiders. The 17-year-old girl mentions the reputation of the institution as a "*High Society school*" (interview, line 1260). The students are regarded as the "*rich kids*" (ibid., line 1261) of the town, because they go to a private school. Charlotte rejects this external label, because it obviously has very negative connotations for her. She also distinguishes between her school and state schools, emphasising its holistic approach to education, with which she can identify.

With regard to 'elite' and 'excellence', Charlotte develops a complex functionally-oriented elite concept at the communicative level with a vertical hierarchy. For her, in various sectors, 'elite' is in each case the "*top league*" (ibid., lines 1273f.). Within this framework, everybody strives for an elite position in order to get to the top. This hierarchical idea is evidenced for example in her outline of a "*high society*" (ibid., line 1301). This differs from the externally applied label of the "*High Society school*" (ibid., line 1260) in that Charlotte values being able to attend such a privileged school and is grateful for the opportunity. This gratitude and the awareness of the special opportunities the school offers to its students is something that external observers obviously do not credit the students with. Charlotte mentioned that not everybody can attend the school, evidencing unequal educational paths. In contrast to 'elite', which she regards as imposed from outside on someone or something, Charlotte prefers the term 'excellence' which for her reflects each person's own evaluation of a state, so that you have to define performance from within yourself as perfect.

Charlotte's best friend Sandra Moeller, who participated with her in the group discussion, also comes from an academic German parental home with very high economic capital. The academic orientations of the two girls are in part divergent. Sandra's parents exert a lot of pressure on their daughter, "*because of course they don't want to spend so much money for the school [...] and then nothing comes of it*" (group discussion, line 1371). Sandra does not have such a relaxed attitude to academic endeavour. For this friend, the special thing about the school is its internationality and also the opportunities it offers them for the future. Matching this and Charlotte's individual rejection of the negative reputation of the school, the two students distance themselves from the label of a "*bosses' kids*" school (ibid., line 1876). They claim to appreciate the opportunities offered

by the International School and to have kept their feet on the ground. With this positive characteristic they distinguish themselves from a socially ignorant and arrogant 'elite'. In contrast to Charlotte's individual constructions, in the group discussion the schoolgirls reject the distinctiveness of the term 'elite' and develop 'excellence' as a desirable perfection, matching Charlotte's individual construction.

Gwyn Cordalis

In contrast to Charlotte, Gwyn Cordalis can be shown to have a comprehensive educational orientation both within the school and in extracurricular activities. This 15-year-old was born in the USA, lived there for the first five years of his life and has attended the International School since first grade. His parents are from southern Europe, where the family regularly spends their holidays together. Gwyn comes from an economically privileged, academic parental home.

Gwyn is one of the academic top performers at the school and is regarded by the teachers as a future PhD-candidate. He neither comments on this nor calls it into question, which indicates that Gwyn finds this an obvious educational ambition. Gwyn achieves best academic performance effortlessly and acquires knowledge over a broad range on his own initiative and creatively. Outside the school setting, Gwyn is also generally a quick learner, oriented towards best personal performance.

Unlike Charlotte, Gwyn does not distinguish between German and international locations or courses. He treats the international setting as something natural. The concept of world citizenship seems to need no explanation in this context and is linked in the interview with an ethno-comparative, socio-political view of the world.

Like Charlotte, Gwyn judges the young people at the International School in terms of how grateful they are for the opportunities offered to them there. He distinguishes himself from those who do not make an effort. His biographic narrative evidences an academic habitus oriented towards excellence and perfection. He frames 'elite' on the one hand in terms of high economic capital, including the material facilities of the school. On the other hand, he defines it in terms of perfection, which is to be strived for individually.

The central collective orientation of Gwyn and his friend Sandra Herz, who is also an academic achiever at the school, is towards the exchange of knowledge over a broad range. The group orientation with regard to ungrateful, arrogant students closely matches Gwyn's individual orientation. They assess others in terms of their efforts, and dismiss students who are lazy and arrogant, but who claim elite status for themselves. They criticise the lazy rich (German) students who do not value the opportunities. 'Excellence' is seen as a desirable goal, but at the current time

they reject this label for themselves. Gwyn and Sandra take an intellectual position in the group discussion with regard to the private school discourse, criticising the divergent development of the state and private school sectors as a marker of unequal access to education in general. However, they do not extend this reflexively to the private status of their own school.

Rebekka Weinstein

The third student presented here is 15-year-old Rebekka Weinstein. She is moderately ambitious at school, and demonstrates a special processing of the International School as an institution for supporting world citizens. Rebekka grew up bilingually in Germany and has close ties to Canada through her Canadian mother. At the time of the interview she had been at the school for two years. Her parents both have an academic degree. Since her mother is a teacher at the International School, Rebekka is in a different position from those students whose parents pay the school fees in full. Her large family in Canada establishes a positive horizon for Rebekka, and have had an important influence on her educational choices.

This student does not strive for top academic achievements and at first sight seems to have a relaxed attitude about this topic, showing a pragmatic dimension. However, with her emphasis on the fact that she does not work enough and in various comments on the looming International Baccalaureate exams she evidences that good academic achievements are in fact good for her and that she is uncertain about this and worried (Kramer & Helsper 2010). She shows a striving for success and has a hierarchical understanding of possible achievements in life. Rebekka distinguishes herself from students who in her opinion drag down the grade averages achieved at the school. These are above all German students who are at the school at the cost of their parents. The families of these young people have the necessary economic capital to pay the school fees, and in the view of Rebekka this gains them admission to the school irrespective of their own interest.

This student locates herself in the group of *mongrels* ("*Mischlinge*", interview, line. 1284) at the school and this is of central importance for her own biography. Closely related to this is Rebekka's identification of herself as a world citizen. In contrast to the other students presented here, she emphasises the support her school provides for those coming from different foreign educational contexts. Here Rebekka finds it important to distance herself from the outside perception of this school. Local residents emphasise the private status of the school and confront her with the assignation of being a member of an 'elite' school, which Rebekka associates with economic capital. For her the special thing about the school is the supportive function already mentioned.

Rebekka's individual orientation to the reputation of the school is matched closely by that of her peer group, which includes two Germans and a German-Spanish student, all from medium- to high-level academic milieus. The International School represents their main experience of school. The

external perception of the school as an elite school is explained by its private status. The members of this group do not identify themselves as being 'elite', which they regard as a "*stamp*" (group discussion, lines 2918f.). Rebekka herself, at one point in the group discussion, does not make reference to the school as an elite school, but only with regard to the academic curriculum. Here too it is possible to reconstruct lines of connection between individual and collective orientations, inasmuch as these young people characterise the school in this context in terms of the support it provides for students of various nationalities and linguistic backgrounds.

Distinction and coherence

In the following, the empirical results are refined along the lines of coherence and distinction between the young people and their peers, which can be located firstly at the level outside the school and secondly at the inner-school level. All the young people in the interviews and group discussions address the external reputation of their school and the implications of this. These attributions bring together the school and its actors, in particular the students themselves, so that they have to respond in some ways to those images. None of the analysed cases avoids mentioning the reputation of the school. In the narratives of the young people, labels are referred to such as the "rich kids' school" or the "high society school". Charlotte, Rebekka and their peers also associate this reputation with the term 'elite' school or with the private school status. The accusation they perceive is thus one of being an economic elite and excluding others on the basis of economic capital.

Overall, the students distance themselves from the externally attributed arrogance. This strategy of self-representation is common to all the young people presented here, and along these lines they negotiate a coherent image with respect to the outside world. The groups develop their own 'elite' constructions, by means of which they continue to set themselves and their school apart positively. For example, Rebekka and her girlfriends relate 'elite' to the special pedagogical programme of the International School, whereas Gwyn and his friend Sandra, and also Charlotte and her friend conceive excellence as an individually desirable goal, to be achieved with hard work but without arrogance.

While these young people and their peers come together in opposition to external negative attributions drawing on economic exclusivity in combination with certain characterisations, internally they negotiate distinctions along these lines. In all interviews and group discussions, all students distance themselves from the figure of the lazy, rich student. Gwyn und Sandra negotiate this by criticising the fact that these students do not make an effort at school and are not grateful for the chance the school offered to them. They are spoiled.

Similar arguments were presented by the group around Rebekka. In the relevant group discussion the rich students were linked with German nationality. The majority of the German students are non-mobile young people whose parents often send their children to the school to acquire an International Baccalaureate, and who pay the school fees themselves. In addition to belonging to a rich family, they are often accused of not being interested in attending the school. In order to distance themselves from these students, the young people in the group discussions present their own mixed-nationality status and/or emphasise their transnational experience. This negotiation documents the fact that nationality assignments at the International School are complex and multi-layered. Charlotte and her friend Sandra Moeller both come from non-mobile German families with high levels of economic capital. They negotiate distinctions with students who are not grateful for their opportunities, without ascribing nationalities. All the young people and their peers share the central self-representation as world citizens, by which they are able to distance themselves from student images with negative connotations within the school.

4. Conclusions and perspectives

Relating the findings presented here with the state of research on Elite Schools of Sport, International Schools, and their students, which has previously been restricted to institutional analyses, in addition to quantitative studies of the education and careers of top-performance athletes or to the educational expectations of students at International Schools, we can conclude the following: In contrast to the quantitative studies of Emrich et al. (2008) and Conzelmann et al. (2001), who concentrated on the comparison of top athletes at Elite Schools of Sport and at other schools, or on the education and occupational careers of top athletes, in our qualitative cross-sectional evaluation conducted from a praxeological perspective we have been able to identify a broad spectrum of habitual orientations to school education among the students at a sports school. These range from an orientation in terms of top school achievements to the wish to simply pass the final school qualification. However, the interviewed top athletes have in common the fact that despite differing academic ambitions in their educational biographies, they all attach more importance to their sports career.

In international quantitative studies, Hayden & Thompson (1997) and Hayden et al. (2000) have identified an interest in obtaining international school qualifications among students at international schools, as well as in going on to study at international higher education institutions, and their identification with “international mindedness”. This seems at first sight to apply to the young people at the International School presented here. However, a closer qualitative analysis of these educational biographies from a praxeological perspective that takes into account the integration in different family, school and external experiential frameworks, shows that the habitual educational

orientations of the international students and their views of world citizenship differ widely, from a comprehensive educational orientation and an intellectual view of the concept of “international education” (Gwyn) to a strategic educational orientation and purposive-rational interest (Charlotte) in international and social networking (Keßler et al. 2014).

Comparing our findings once more with the ‘elite’ and ‘excellence’ discourse, what significance do such elite and excellence semantics have for the distinction and coherence forming processes of the young people studied and their peers? A shared coherence-forming point of reference for the sports students and their friendship groups is the identification with the principle of promoting sporting elites, but not with the label Elite School of Sport, which was only accepted by two of the young interviewees and their peers. The top athletes criticised in particular the presence of recreational athletes at the school, the lack of understanding among teachers for the difficulties they faced combining sports and learning, and also in other interviews (not presented here), the poor academic standards at the sports school.

The lines of distinction of the young people and their friends lie along the axis of whether one belongs to the group of top sporting performers or not. However, in the case of Philipp there is a discrepancy between his individual orientation and the collective orientation of his friendship group, because one member of the group is only a hobby athlete. While Philipp was very critical in the interview of the presence of hobby athletes at the school, avoidance of this topic in the group discussion ensured the coherence and the equality of status within the peer group (see also Oswald 2008).

Like the head teacher of the sports school, the students also use ‘elite’ uncritically and affirmatively, because the elite semantic forms an obvious part of everyday communications at an Elite School of Sport. They relate implicitly to a functional elite concept (Parsons 1977; Hoffmann-Lange 2003; Krüger et al. 2012b) which equates an ‘elite’ status with certified performance, in this case with top sporting performance. This also applies in a similar fashion for a student at the International School, Charlotte Marten, who is integrated in exclusive family, school and external experiential socialisation contexts and who, in her argumentation, aspires to belong to the top league of the performance elite. In the group discussion with her friend Sandra Moeller, however, the term ‘elite’ is judged critically, because Sandra does not like the distinctiveness and arrogance of the concept. Doubts concerning the arrogance of the term ‘elite’ are also raised by the other two International School interviewees and their peers for whom the elite semantic is reinterpreted and only related to the outstanding educational programme of the International School or equated with academic excellence. In contrast to the interviewees at the sports school, the term ‘elite’ becomes a problem for the international students and for the head teacher if it is linked with economic power and social

exclusivity, which can appear to undermine the meritocratic logic of individual performance as a basis for success (Hadjar 2008).

The coherence-forming point of reference for the students at the International School and their peers is their shared interest in going on to international higher education, the wish to be a world citizen, and the pursuit of excellence. However, they do not relate this explicitly to the curriculum of the International School, but rather to their particular biographical and collective experiential contexts. The young people also have in common the wish to distance themselves from the label of the 'rich kid's school' attached externally to the International School, which can be associated with social exclusion by means of economic capital. But this does not entail high internal coherence. Central lines of distinction run along the axes of social milieu, school achievement, and in part ethnicity. In the argumentation figure of the lazy rich Germans, who lower the average academic grades of the International School, as presented by Gwyn and Rebekka and their peers, who have international family backgrounds, economic factors, school performance, and ethnic criteria can be seen to overlap (see also Budde 2013).

In addition to the young people at the International School and the sports school, in our project we have also investigated young top-level dancers and musicians, who have no problems using the term 'excellence' when characterising outstanding personal performance in school or in their careers outside school. As in scientific discourse (Maaz et al. 2009; Ricken 2009), the excellence concept is also associated with outstanding performance in their everyday language.

If the young people are not biographically integrated in corresponding academic contexts or in external career fields, peer cultures or family backgrounds, then the terms 'elite' and 'excellence' tend to be associated with references in the media, such as to elite soldiers or to nobility ("your excellency"). Exactly how the educational pathways of the youths we interviewed will continue to develop once they finish attending school and begin studying at various universities, and what ideas and concepts will they continue to associate with 'elite' and 'excellence', are questions we will not be able to answer for another two to four years, when we will have continued our longitudinal study.

Endnotes

¹ Ambivalences and taboos in the German discourse originate at least in part against the background of the 'elite schools' established in Nazi Germany (see also Helsper et al. in this publication).

² The 'gymnasium' is a form of higher secondary school in Germany which qualifies successful students for university studies. All but the International School in our sample are such schools. Because of its standardized

curriculum, the International School does not call itself 'gymnasium' although it, too, offers school leaving certificates that qualify for university studies.

³ Results are presented from the project "Exclusive Educational Careers of Young People and the Role of Peer Cultures", funded by the Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft from 1.10.2011 to 30.09.2017. In addition to the authors, the project team includes Daniela Winter as research associate, assisted by Claudia Eckart, Judith Fuchs, Stephanie Kreuz, Marleen von Wirth, Jasmin Lüdemann, Desirée Jörke, and Romy Thomas. The translations from our empirical data give the sense of the interview statements but do not exactly reproduce the verbatim oral transcriptions in the German. All names of persons and places are pseudonyms.

⁴ Studies of International Schools are closely related to research on transnational careers, in which the emphasis is mainly on the subjective experiences and ways of thinking of actors (Hannerz 2004; Niedner-Kalthoff 2005; Kreuzer & Roth 2006). However, the importance of schools for transnational careers has so far been rather neglected.

⁵ A total of 58 out of 66 students took part in the quantitative survey of students in the tenth grade at the sport school, which represents a participation rate of 88 percent. At the International School the participation rate was 93 percent, with 94 students out of 101 potential interviewees taking part.

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