



“We learn Latin, they learn to cook”: students’, principals’, and teachers’ coproductions of exclusive public secondary schools

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Abstract. Recent years have seen growing interest in the role of selective public secondary schools as places of state-funded privilege production. Students’ experiences in and perceptions of these schools are still under-researched. Focusing on the transition to *Gymnasium*, highly selective public secondary schools in Zurich, this article analyses how students are addressed by principals, teachers, and education policies and how they perceive the *Gymnasium* and its students. Drawing on a 13-month ethnography with eight students, the article shows that students learn to see the *Gymnasia* as stellar schools for hard-working and intelligent students who have earned their privileges. Students play an important role in coproducing and legitimizing their privileged status in the educational field by drawing on the notion of merit. Most students distanced themselves from the non-*Gymnasium* “other”, labeling them as less hard-working and less intelligent. These processes ultimately contribute to a hierarchization and division of Zurich’s secondary schooling landscape.

1 Introduction

We learn Latin and they learn how to cook. The *Sekundarschule* is not as hard as the *Gymnasium* either. It is much easier. (19_10_22_Interview)

Emil, an upper-middle-class boy that participated in our research, saw clear differences between the *Gymnasium*, which he attended, and the other secondary school type, the *Sekundarschule*. While he portrays the *Gymnasium* as an academically challenging school, he describes the *Sekundarschule* as a school that teaches more practical skills. The *Gymnasium* is the most prestigious secondary school track in Switzerland and the only one that grants unrestricted access to university within the public school system.¹ Emil’s description of the differences between the types of school

hints at his impression of a somewhat divided landscape of secondary schooling in Zurich and the superior role of the *Gymnasium* and its students in this landscape.

Only about 20 % of students in the city of Zurich transfer to a *Gymnasium* after they pass a central entrance examination (CEE) (Kanton Zürich, 2022). During the first semester at the *Gymnasium* students are at the school on probation and have to perform sufficiently to be allowed to stay at the *Gymnasium*. This highly selective transition to secondary schooling is an important spatial change in students’ lives (Bauer, 2018). This is when both students who transfer to these prestigious schools and those who do not pass the CEE form their images of the *Gymnasium* and learn about their positions in the educational landscape. This makes the transition an interesting time to study students’ perceptions of these school, which is why this article focuses on this time. Moreover, it is a key moment for the reproduction of inequalities at the intersection of social class and migration background (e.g., Beck and Jäpel, 2019; Neuenschwander, 2017; SKBF, 2023): students from socioeconomically privileged backgrounds and those without migration backgrounds have higher chances of transferring to the *Gymnasium* than students from lower so-

¹Switzerland has a federal education system in which the primary responsibility for education lies with the cantons, Switzerland’s administrative regions. Zurich has a 6-year-long *Gymnasium* starting after elementary school, on which this paper focuses, as well as a 4-year-long *Gymnasium*, starting from grade 9. Some cantons only have *Gymnasia* from grade 9.

cioeconomic backgrounds, even when these less-advantaged students perform equally in elementary school (Gerhard and Bayard, 2020; Moser et al., 2011).

This article presents interdisciplinary research analyzing how privilege is produced, reproduced, and legitimized in exclusive schools and how these schools and their students position themselves in the schooling landscape and broader society (e.g., Gaztambide-Fernández and Maudlin, 2015; Holt and Bowlby, 2019; Khan, 2011; Merry and Boterman, 2020; Yoon, 2016). Because most studies focus on private elite schools, highly selective public schools that provide elite education, and especially students’ experiences and perceptions of these schools, are under-researched (Holt and Bowlby, 2019). Deeper insights into public elite education and students’ experiences of it are important because they can help us better understand the impact of highly selective schools on young peoples’ lives and their positioning in society and its role in inequality reproduction and social cohesion. Accordingly, our article furthers the research in two respects: first, it shows how students are influenced by how they are addressed by *Gymnasium* teachers, principals, and educational policy during the transition period from elementary school to *Gymnasium* and sheds light on the perspectives, perceptions, and experiences of students in exclusive public schools. This enables us to show how students in our ethnography mostly echoed how they had been addressed by the schools and described *Gymnasium* students as not only being academically superior. By doing so, we follow the call in the geographies of education to listen to students and to study them as subjects rather than merely as objects (Bauer and Landolt, 2018; Holloway et al., 2010; Nguyen et al., 2017).

Second, the article moves beyond the anglophone focus of the geographies of education (Henry, 2020) by adding a perspective from a country that has not widely introduced neoliberal educational policies (Steiner-Khamsi, 2006). Switzerland never implemented high-stakes testing, nor does it publish performance reports for individual schools to increase competition, and it generally has well-financed urban public schools with good reputations. Against this backdrop, we consider Zurich’s *Gymnasia* a promising field to explore exclusive public schools as places of state-funded privilege production, as especially in Switzerland, the *Gymnasium* has rarely been studied as a public elite school.

Conceptually, this article is inspired by Bourdieu’s work on cultural reproduction and education (Bourdieu, 1973, 2018) and his concept of capital and field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986). Using a Bourdieusian framework helps to illuminate both the production of symbolic capital at the *Gymnasia* and how students’ belief in meritocracy is relevant to their positioning in Zurich’s student body and their self-understanding. The article builds on a 13-month ethnography, including participant observations and interviews with eight children (11–13 years old) at the transition to *Gymnasium* and in-depth interviews with relevant actors in the field. This allows us to shift attention to the students’ perspective while also ana-

lyzing the addressing of the students, which influences their experiences and perceptions. We investigated two interrelated questions to gain new insight into state-funded privilege production at public schools in a non-anglophone context. (i) How are students addressed by *Gymnasia* teachers, principals, and educational policy during the transition period, and how are the *Gymnasia* presented? (ii) How do students experience and perceive the *Gymnasia* and their position within the field of secondary education in Zurich during the transition period?

We begin this article by reviewing the interdisciplinary literature on educational inequalities and public and private elite education and introducing the theoretical framework of the analysis, followed by a description of secondary education in the city of Zurich. We then elaborate on our methods and data before turning to our findings in the fifth and sixth sections. We end with a discussion and suggestions for future research.

2 Public and private elite schools as places of privilege production and reproduction

Geographers and sociologists have studied schools as places where inequalities are perpetuated and class advantage and privilege are constructed, maintained, and legitimized (e.g., Hafner et al., 2022; Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Koh and Kenway, 2016; Kuyvenhoven and Boterman, 2021; Lipman, 2007; Reay et al., 2011). The geographies of education research contributed to this field, particularly by studying students’ identity construction in schools (e.g., Davidson, 2008; Holt and Bowlby, 2019) and unequal educational chances in stratified public school systems (e.g., Boterman, 2019; Butler and Hamnett, 2012; Wilson and Bridge, 2019). One increasingly discussed driver of inequalities and privilege reproduction in stratified public school systems is highly selective and elitist public secondary schools (e.g., Gamsu, 2018; Merry and Boterman, 2020; Parekh and Gaztambide-Fernández, 2017).

The focus of studies on elite education has long been on private boarding schools that, while becoming more diverse, still predominantly educate the financial elite (e.g., Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Khan, 2011). Recent years have seen a shift towards understanding the elite as more complex and fluid, including “new elites” who have parents with low socioeconomic status (Harvey and Maclean, 2008; Savage and Williams, 2008). This has also resulted in an important new subfield in the studies of elite education: a small number of studies have focused on analyzing highly selective public schools, some of them boarding schools, that offer academically more demanding educational programs and more extracurricular activities as a form of state-funded elite education (e.g., Gamsu, 2018; Gibson, 2019; Holt and Bowlby, 2019; Merry and Boterman, 2020; Persson, 2021; Yoon, 2016). In contrast to private elite schools, selective

public schools are not financially exclusive because they do not charge tuition. They often strongly emphasize their meritocratic character because they select their students by academic achievement and distance themselves from the financial elite (Helsper et al., 2014; Persson, 2021). But despite public elite schools’ financial inclusiveness and their importance to “recruitment into the elite class” through achievement (Savage, 2015:324), they have been shown not to be particularly diverse in their students’ ethnicity or socioeconomic background (Halvorsen, 2022; Yoon, 2016). This results from upper-middle-class parents using their economic and cultural capital to help their children gain entry to these schools (Boterman, 2019; Butler et al., 2013; Reh and Landolt, 2024).

Schools are places that legitimize unequal power relations, strongly influence the students’ identity formation, and teach them about their place in society (Nguyen et al., 2017). Consequently, it is crucial to deepen the understanding of students’ experiences and perspectives in elitist public schools as their students are likely to have powerful positions later in life. Student experiences in elite private schools are well researched (e.g., Khan, 2011; Khan and Jerolmack, 2013; Lillie, 2020; Taylor, 2021). Khan (2011) applied Bourdieu’s theory of capital and habitus in his ethnography of an elite boarding school in the US. The ethnography shows how students have to acquire the embodied skills of ease through interactions at this school to perform elite status and privilege and to position themselves as a meritocratically legitimized elite and not one that inherited their status.

In contrast, questions of how students experience and interpret classed educational landscapes and exclusive public schools are understudied (Holt and Bowlby, 2019). Among the few researchers who have focused on exclusive public schools from students’ perspectives are Louise Holt and Sophie Bowlby, who examined the experiences of girls in a public elite British grammar school to provide insights into how classed privilege is reproduced in public schools. They show how the girls they studied developed a sense of belonging in the school both by othering non-grammar-school students and by classed, gendered, and ethnicized performances as hard-working, successful, and polite students (Holt and Bowlby, 2019).

The exclusion and separation processes of elite educational institutions and the role they play in legitimizing elites’ leadership status were described by Bourdieu (1996) in his study on the “production of nobility” at elite universities in the UK, the US, and France. He writes that “the process of transformation accomplished at ‘elite schools,’ through the magical operations of separation and aggregation... tends to produce... an elite that is not only distinct and separate, but also recognized by others and by itself as worthy of being so” (Bourdieu, 1996:102). Educational institutions legitimize inequalities and the reproduction of the elite by interpreting societally determined differences in abilities such as linguistic skills as differences in talent (Bourdieu, 2018:31).

Bourdieu was writing about educational institutions several decades ago, but the legitimization of elite status and privileges through ostensibly merit-based educational systems is also evident today in elitist public schools in various countries (Phillippo et al., 2021; Törnqvist, 2019). For example, Törnqvist (2019) showed how exclusiveness and privilege production at a public secondary school in Sweden are shaped, legitimized, and disguised by an individualized meritocratic discourse and the downplaying of the students’ socioeconomic backgrounds. This rendered the elite character of the public school compatible with the ethics of an egalitarian school system, thus highlighting how privilege can also be fostered in public schools in a seemingly egalitarian school landscape (Törnqvist, 2019:564).

Bourdieu’s writings and his notion that cultural reproduction through education is fundamental to the reproduction of class-based inequalities have had a lasting influence on research on educational inequalities, including in the geographies of education (Blokland, 2023; Holloway et al., 2024). This article draws on Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction and the legitimization of inequalities through educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1973, 2018) and his conceptualizations of capital and field (Bourdieu, 1977, 1986) to illuminate *Gymnasium* actors’ distinction-making and “symbolic domination” over non-*Gymnasium* others in the field of secondary education in Zurich. The concept of field represents the multidimensional social space in which individuals are differentially positioned depending on their capital: their economic capital such as money; their social capital, which is their durable networks; their cultural capital, which may be embodied, such as language skills, and institutionalized, such as diplomas; and their symbolic capital, which is the distinction and prestige that result from the other forms of capital being perceived as legitimate (Bourdieu, 1986). In the field of school education in Zurich, actors come together with differing levels of cultural, social and economic capital, which influence their ability to act and position themselves in this field. Symbolic domination is another important field-theoretical concept that sheds light on how power relations and consequent dominance in the field are subjectivized and naturalized, influencing where dominated agents feel “the sense of their place” (Bourdieu, 1985:728). Students adopt the system’s assessment and attribute their failure in selection exams not to the system but to their own performance: the system therefore not only selects but also convinces those selected that they themselves are responsible for their elimination (Bourdieu, 2001:21)

The research mentioned above provides insight into how privileged public and private schools contribute to the perpetuation and production of privilege. However, questions remain unanswered regarding students’ experiences and perceptions and their role in producing and reproducing privilege and symbolic capital (not only) during the transition to exclusive public schools (one exception is Phillippo, 2019). This article addresses these questions by studying

distinction-making and privilege production during the transition period to *Gymnasium* in Zurich and the students’ perceptions of and role in these processes. This article focuses on the transition period as the educational experience of competitive school choice has been shown to be “civic lessons” that teach students about societal differences and different positions, the field of education, and their place in it (Phillippo et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is the time when students form their first impression and image of the *Gymnasia*.

3 Secondary education in the city of Zurich

In Zurich, students are divided into different secondary school tracks after elementary school, which finishes with sixth grade at around age 12. After sixth grade, about 80 % of students transfer to *Sekundarschule* with no formal assessment; there, they are tracked into two or three academic levels. Students with good school grades mainly sign up for the central entrance examination (CEE) for the academically most demanding secondary school type, *Gymnasium* (grades 7 to 12). In the city of Zurich about 55 % of students writing the CEE pass it (Kanton Zürich, 2024a). Those who do not pass cannot attend the public *Gymnasium* but have to transfer to *Sekundarschule*. The *Gymnasium* is usually followed by a tertiary education pathway. The *Sekundarschule* lasts 3 years (grades 7 to 9). Afterwards, most *Sekundarschule* students start a multiyear vocational education and training (VET) (SKBF, 2023), but a few *Sekundarschule* students take another CEE to transfer to a 4-year *Gymnasium* that finishes with the same qualification, the *Matura*, as the 6-year *Gymnasium*, which is the focus of this article. Both grant unrestricted access to university. Overall, 21.8 % of the student population in the city of Zurich obtained an academic *Matura* (*gymnasiale Matura*) in 2021 (Kanton Zürich, 2024b). Students with a VET also have the possibility to obtain a vocational *Matura* which grants access to tertiary education at universities of applied sciences or a vocational tertiary education (*höhere Berufsausbildung*).

The high competition for admission to public *Gymnasia* in Zurich is strongly influenced by the city’s growing population and thriving economy, which results in a high proportion of residents with either vocational tertiary degrees or degrees from universities or universities of applied sciences (56 %) (Stadt Zürich, 2023) and a foreign-born population of roughly 33 % (Stadt Zürich, 2022). This combination has a strong impact on the high competition for *Gymnasium* places for two reasons: firstly, parents with tertiary education are interested in maintaining their status and therefore want their children to transfer to *Gymnasium* to be able to attend university (Cattaneo and Wolter, 2016). Secondly, first-generation foreigners in Switzerland prefer an academic education over a VET and tend not to value the labor market outcomes of vocational education (Abrassart et al., 2020). Both factors intensify the competition for *Gymnasium* places, as the tran-

sition rate from elementary school has remained constant at around 20 % in the canton of Zurich since the 2000s (Criblez, 2014; Pfister, 2022).

The children and their families have to choose which *Gymnasium* they want to attend when registering for the CEE of their choice. There is no possibility to state a second or third choice. This is the only instance in Zurich’s school system when a school choice is mandatory as all *Sekundarschulen* and all elementary schools are catchment-based schools. All *Gymnasia* offer the same curriculum in the first 2 years, including compulsory Latin lessons. However, there are minimal differences between the *Gymnasia* such as one lesson more or less in the sciences. Furthermore, the six *Gymnasia* differ in terms of location (three of the six *Gymnasia* are in the privileged Zürichberg neighborhood, while the other three are in other parts of the city) and size (ranging from 700 to 2000 students). *Gymnasia* in Zurich are not ranked, and no performance reports or average *Matura* grades are publicly available, which makes the Zurich case different from other cities such as Chicago, which has implemented education reforms that put schools into direct performance competition (see, e.g., Phillippo, 2019). Besides the public *Gymnasia*, there are also a few private *Gymnasia* in Zurich, which charge relatively high tuition fees. Public *Gymnasia* have a good reputation in Zurich, and private *Gymnasia* tend to be seen as a second-best option for children who did not pass the CEE for the public *Gymnasia*.

There are considerable differences between the seven urban school districts in Zurich in transfer rates from elementary school to *Gymnasium* because socioeconomic inequalities are reproduced at this transition and the school districts vary in their socioeconomic makeup due to residential segregation in the city. The most privileged district, with the lowest percentage of social aid recipients and German-as-second-language students and the highest income level, has a transfer rate to *Gymnasium* that is more than 3 times higher than that of the least privileged district (Kanton Zürich, 2022). Students with a migration background and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged are underrepresented at all *Gymnasia* in Zurich, but the *Gymnasia*’s diversity varies in the migration background of their students (Gerhard and Bayard, 2020). The few existing qualitative studies that analyze how inequalities are reproduced at the transition to secondary schooling in Zurich and other cantons indicate that the parents’ cultural and economic capital and their ability to support their children (Bauer and Landolt, 2022; Reh and Landolt, 2024) and the teachers’ assessment and grading, which are sometimes biased by the students’ social class, are important (Hofstetter, 2017; Streckeisen et al., 2007).

4 Methods

This article draws on a 13-month ethnography conducted by Carlotta Reh. The ethnography consisted of participant observations, spontaneous ethnographic interviews, the collection of documents, and recorded in-depth interviews. Conducting interviews with actors in *Gymnasium* education in Zurich allows us to capture the “nexus of doings and sayings” (Schatzki, 1996) and to conduct an in-depth empirical analysis of the relation of the students’, parents’, teachers’, and principals’ practices and narrative accounts. The interview situation reflects these differently from observing the actors in conversation with their peers or in everyday life and complements the participant observations.

The participant observations were conducted with eight students who were at the transition to *Gymnasium* and their families, teachers, and classmates (see Table A1). Four of those students passed the CEE and transferred to a *Gymnasium* after the summer. One student did not want to continue in the study after the CEE (Ronja). As this meant that only three student participants would transfer to *Gymnasium*, another student who had passed the CEE and whom Carlotta Reh knew already through Sunil and Eliano joined after the CEE (Gabriel). The students came from diverse socioeconomic and migration backgrounds, included both males and females, and attended different elementary schools across the city. The participants were recruited through elementary schools and a private nonprofit initiative that prepares disadvantaged students for the CEE. The participants were observed at multiple locations, including lessons at elementary schools and *Gymnasias*, hanging out with their friends outside of school, and at school-choice-related events such as information evenings and taster days. The data were collected during the whole transition period, starting in October 2021 with the start of the school choice events and the students’ CEE preparation during sixth grade and finishing in November 2022 after the first months at *Gymnasium*. Participant observations lasted between 1 and 4 h each. Carlotta mostly became a “participant-as-observer” (Gold, 1958): they were known as an observing researcher to the students and their friends and siblings while still being largely integrated in the field and included in the classroom and family life, for instance when students approached them for help during classes or joining a family dinner. The analysis presented in this article focuses on the school choice period and the first moments and months at the *Gymnasias* and included those field notes produced at 30 participant observations at the *Gymnasias* or the students’ homes during their first weeks at the *Gymnasias* and some of the field notes taken at their home during the school choice period (see Table A2 for an overview of the data included for the analysis for this article). By focusing on the transition period, we can show how *Gymnasium* staff construct their schools as exclusive and how they address students during the transition and how students experience and perceive the *Gymnasias* and their posi-

tion within the field of secondary education in Zurich during this time.

Moreover, the ethnographic data set includes 36 transcripts from semi-structured interviews with various actors that were involved in the transition: principals of all six public *Gymnasias* in Zurich starting after elementary school, a few of the students’ *Gymnasium* teachers, all their elementary school teachers, and most students’ parents. Furthermore, episodic interviews (Flick, 2019) with the students themselves were conducted twice: once in sixth grade after the CEE results were sent out and once in seventh grade after the first 2 months at *Gymnasium* to discuss their first weeks there. All interviews sought to understand how the participants talked about the *Gymnasium* and its students and their perceptions on questions of inequalities and merit at the transition to *Gymnasium*. All participants and their legal guardians gave their written consent to participate in the study.

For this article, all interview transcripts and field notes were open-coded with a focus on exclusion and privilege production following Charmaz’s (2006) grounded theory approach. Afterwards, key themes and patterns were identified. These included both conceptual themes from the literature and our research questions and “in vivo themes” emerging from the data (Charmaz, 2006).

5 The transition period: a platform to address students

During the transition period, the *Gymnasias*’ teachers and principals present the *Gymnasias* to prospective students at various events and in the first weeks at the *Gymnasium* and in doing so position the *Gymnasias* in the field of secondary schooling in Zurich.

5.1 The best and the brightest

Sunil and Carlotta attended an information event by *Pilatus Gymnasium* on a November evening. Sunil, a boy from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background with German as his second language, was already slightly bored after a rather dry description of the differences between the *Sekundarschule* and the *Gymnasium* at the beginning of the event. However, when the principal started to talk about the right students for the *Gymnasium* and emphasized that it was not a school for everyone, he started to focus on the principal and seemed to listen more actively. The principal portrayed the ideal *Gymnasium* student, describing them as “gifted”, “highly interested and curious”, and “hard-working”. These and similar portrayals of the typical *Gymi-Kind* (child at a *Gymnasium*) were dominant at the information sessions and the taster days of the *Gymnasias*. The addressing of the students as talented *Gymi-Kinder* was also conspicuous in the first weeks at the *Gymnasium*. In a lesson in the second week at the *Gymnasium* in Ida’s class, students were asked to raise their current concerns with the school work. One boy spoke up:

Leo says that he never had to do homework in elementary school because he had always finished everything in class and now he has to get used to doing homework. The class teacher nods and says: “You were all the best in your elementary schools, now you have to get used to work harder for school”. (01_09_22_Fieldnotes)

The collective narrative of the *Gymi-Kind* serves as a constant confirmation of the excellence of the *Gymnasium* students and their positive character traits. It functions as legitimization and naturalization of the *Gymnasium* and its students’ privileges (Bourdieu, 2018). The students have been publicly recognized as merit-based academic elite students by teachers, principals, and students in the competitive school system in Zurich, which gives them a superior status. Amara’s elementary school homeroom teacher reinforced the image of the very intelligent *Gymnasium* student in front of her students in the classroom but later criticized the *Gymnasium* students’ status in an interview:

I don’t think it’s good what kind of status is made of it. So that the *Gymnasium* students have the status of being the best and clever ones. (21_12_21_Interview)²

This image of the *Gymnasium* and the addressing of its prospective students as academically elite is ostensibly justified by the selection of the students through a combination of students’ grades in sixth grade, their results in the CEE, and a semester-long probation period. This allows the *Gymnasias* to position themselves and their students as a meritocratic and academic “elite”, reinforcing the accumulation of symbolic capital of *Gymnasium* students (Bourdieu, 1986). The students are taught through this form of address that their privileges, such as being able to choose a school and having more specialized teaching rooms such as labs and teachers that are experts in their subjects,³ are earned and that they deserve to be treated differently. This is mirrored in the observation that the term “elite” is frowned upon by *Gymnasium* staff. Teachers and principals would rather choose terms such as “gifted” and “the best and brightest”, and they made sure to distance themselves from an elite with high volumes of economic capital. Similar observations have been made in the egalitarian Nordic countries and Germany, where elitism has a rather negative connotation (see Halvorsen, 2022; Helsper et al., 2014; Törnqvist, 2019). Only one teacher at *Pilatus Gymnasium* called the *Gymnasium* an “elite institution”, but

²All interview quotations and field notes used in this article were translated from Swiss-German to English by the first author.

³*Gymnasium* teachers usually only teach one or two subjects, in which they have a master degree from a university, while *Sekundarschule* teachers teach multiple subjects and earn their degrees at universities of teacher education. *Gymnasias* emphasized in the info events that their teachers, in contrast to *Sekundarschule* teachers, are true “experts” in their fields.

she clearly stated that she referred to a meritocratic elite of cultural capital and educational achievement:

I simply believe that the *Gymnasium* is and should remain an elite institution. Elite not in the sense of “the most money” or “the most family history” or whatever, but elite in the sense of really the most talented and also the most motivated students. (12_09_22_Interview)

Another facet of the *Gymnasias* addressing the students during the transition is the vision of successful futures that is presented at the admission ceremonies and information evenings (see Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Students were repeatedly addressed by principals and teachers as future university students and specifically as students at the public elite university ETH Zurich, as future doctors and lawyers, and hence as people who are prepared for leadership positions. Despite the highly regarded Swiss education system with multiyear VET, the institutionalized cultural capital that comes with a university education is an important prerequisite to becoming part of the upper-middle class and elite in Switzerland (Pfister, 2022). In their speech at the admission ceremony for the new seventh graders, which started with students performing the song “9 to 5” and ending it with the statement that at the *Gymnasium* students would rather need to work from 9 to 7, the principal of *Matterhorn Gymnasium* talked about the students’ future:

The principal goes on to say that our world needs young people who will ask questions, who will discuss ideas and who are curious. The students will have the chance to make the world a better place and here at *Matterhorn Gymnasium* they will be given the tools to do so. (22_08_22_Fieldnotes)

Addressing the aspiring *Gymnasium* students as future university students who have the power to change the world for the better and the *Gymnasium* as the school that prepares them for this future was common during the transition period.

5.2 Stellar schools of choice – addressing through educational policy

The second important aspect of how students are addressed during the transition period is the addressing through educational policy, more precisely the organization of the transition to secondary schooling in the city of Zurich. There is a free choice for the selective *Gymnasias* but not for the *Sekundarschulen* because these are catchment-based schools, which means that student attend the *Sekundarschule* in their catchment area. This difference, as well as the above-mentioned differences in teacher salaries and teacher education and the differences in the schools’ facilities and equipment, is grounded in the specific organization of the education system in Switzerland. While the *Gymnasias* are gov-

erned and financed by the respective cantons (in this case the canton of Zurich), the elementary schools and the *Sekundarschulen* are managed and funded by the municipalities, in this case the city of Zurich.

The differing school choice and transition policies for the *Sekundarschule* and the *Gymnasium* result in marketing events for parents and students but only for the *Gymnasia*. These events include information evenings with image films, parent school tours during which senior students show parents around campus, and taster days where prospective students have taster lessons and receive merchandizing material such as stickers and pencils. Each year, at least twice as many students as there are places apply at all *Gymnasia*. Furthermore, the *Gymnasia* do not compete for the students with the highest grades: if more students pass the CEE at a *Gymnasium* than the school has places, some students are redistributed to other *Gymnasia*. However, the *Gymnasium* with the highest demand is not allowed to select those students who have the highest CEE results but must select students based on their residential proximity to the school. Hence, marketing them is not necessary. But *Gymnasia* use the school choice policy to host marketing events at which they construct and present themselves as stellar institutions with outstanding amenities and interesting and diverse extracurricular activities which differentiate them from the *Sekundarschule* and add to their desirability and prestige. One *Gymnasium* even had a dedicated website for prospective students to promote itself:

Technology is in the air everywhere in the building. Well, your free iPad, which you get during the probation period, doesn't look particularly unique. But the special chemistry and physics labs and the Makerspace, our workshop for electronics and robotics, create an exciting technical-scientific atmosphere. (<https://schnuppertag-hopro.ch/cms/>, last access: 23 October 2024)

The fact that marketing events during the transition period take place only for the selective *Gymnasia* also addresses the sixth graders and teaches students about deservedness and importance. Only the students aspiring to attend the academically more challenging *Gymnasia* are solicited; have a day off from elementary school to attend taster days, which makes the different treatment of students at this transition very visible in the classroom; and can choose a *Gymnasium*.

Emil's father, who partly grew up in the United States and attended a prestigious public university there, compared the *Gymnasium* promotion events to those of universities in the US and hence compared tuition-free public *Gymnasia* to educational institutions charging high tuition fees. He said,

these image films of the *Gymnasia*, I think I've said this before, are like these advertising videos for university or college, and the taster day for the *Gymi*, like in the US for college, is very

similar. I was surprised this was even offered. (07_01_22_Interview)

These marketing events and other promotions potentially make the *Gymnasia* even more desirable than the *Sekundarschulen*. This in return awards the students who attend *Gymnasia* or try to transfer there with symbolic capital. The prospective students that are solicited by the *Gymnasia* can develop a strong identification with the *Gymnasium* even during the school choice process. Emil attended taster days at two *Gymnasia* and info events at three. When he came home from the taster day at *Matterhorn Gymnasium*, he had made his decision. His mother described the following in an interview: “After that taster day, he was absolutely thrilled with *Matterhorn Gymnasium*, so he came home and put a sticker on his bedroom door that said ‘I love MG’ [laughs]” (07_01_22_Interview). Stickers like this do not even exist for *Sekundarschulen*. This results in a division between the *Sekundarschulen* and the *Gymnasia* and their students in the city of Zurich because they are treated and addressed very differently during the transition process and are given very different degrees of decisive power and possibilities to identify with and be proud of their *Gymnasia*.

6 Students' perception of the *Gymnasia* and their students during the transition period

How they are addressed affects how prospective *Gymnasium* students experience and perceive the *Gymnasium* and its students and thus their own positions in the field of secondary schooling. In this section, we demonstrate how students understand themselves as a merit-based academic elite during the transition, how some students challenged this conception, and how they perceive and coproduce the secondary school landscape as divided and hierarchized.

6.1 The academic elite

When the sixth graders discussed the *Gymnasium* among their peers or with Carlotta, they usually emphasized that the *Gymnasium* is theoretical and academically more demanding, just as Emil elaborated in the opening quotation. Students often highlighted that this is where students learn a classical language instead of having more practical subjects such as “learning how to work,” as Eliano called it (the subject's name is economy, work, and housekeeping). Learning Latin can still be understood as cultural capital and a marker of affiliation to a cultural elite (Sawert, 2018), and it indicated to the students that *Gymnasia* are the schools for the smarter children.

But it was not only by subjects that the *Sekundarschule* was contrasted with the *Gymnasium* by prospective *Gymnasium* students. They also often employed descriptions of *Sekundarschule* students as counterparts from which they clearly distanced themselves; a similar abjection of the non-

grammar-school others has been described by Holt and Bowlby (2019). Ronja, a student with a middle-class background, emphasized shortly after she passed the CEE that “at the *Sekundarschule*, it’s usually the rougher kids who are somehow super cool, and at the *Gymi* it’s always the ones who want to focus on learning” (31_03_22_Interview). Emil, an upper-middle-class boy, after he had passed the CEE even declared that “there are always idiots like that, and they’re all going to *Sekundarschule* now, and I’m going to *Gymi*” (24_03_22_Interview). Overall, the *Sekundarschule* students were often described as the opposite of the hardworking, motivated, and curious *Gymi* student by those attending or planning to attend the *Gymnasium*. The participants gave themselves, *Gymnasium* students, a higher value when they described *Gymnasium* students with many positive attributes and *Sekundarschule* students with rather negative ones.

These short insights from Ronja and Emil show how students at this selective transition may categorize their classmates and themselves into groups with differing symbolic capital. In our research project, we focused on adolescents who aspired to go to *Gymnasium* and therefore cannot make any statements about how this transition is perceived by students who do not try to transfer to *Gymnasium*. Nevertheless, our data show that the design of the transition and the way in which the *Gymnasias* and elementary school teachers address students during this process can lead to a clear hierarchization of Zurich’s students in the eyes of *Gymnasium* students, who position themselves at the top of this hierarchy.

The students in our ethnography mostly echoed how they had been addressed by the *Gymnasias* in the transition period and described *Gymnasium* students as the smartest ones. Amara, a working-class girl who did not pass the CEE, described the “right” students for the *Gymnasium* in an interview after the results of the CEE had been released:

You should be above the average, yes, so if you’re an average kid, then rather not, if you’re more gifted, then you can give it a try. [It is] a school for the particularly intelligent, so to speak. (23_03_22_Interview)

But Eliano’s case indicates that students who did not pass the CEE might change their perception of the *Gymnasium* after they receive their negative CEE result. At the beginning of the transition period, Eliano, a boy from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background with German as a second language, had also told Carlotta that the *Gymnasium* was for the brightest and best students. When Carlotta talked to him about his school choice during a visit at his elementary school early in the transition period, he seemed to have had an intuition that it was harder for him as a non-Swiss child to obtain a place at the *Gymnasium*. He mentioned that the *Pilatus Gymnasium* was his choice because, according to his teacher, it is attended by more foreigners like him (08_11_21_Fieldnotes). After the CEE results were released, he noted that one

socially marginalized group is disadvantaged at the *Gymnasium*:

Carlotta: What would you say, what kind of students go to *Gymnasium*, who is “the right one” for it?

Eliano: Maybe not the foreigners who don’t speak German so well, they won’t make it. (29_03_22_Interview)

After the CEE, he began seeing the *Gymnasium* as a place that can exclude non-native speakers like him, who did not pass the CEE due to their low grade in the German exam despite their hard work and their high performance in math. He experienced a devaluation of his abilities and achievements and seemed to adopt the dominant view of students whose native language is not German as not being good enough for the *Gymnasium* (Bourdieu, 1985). His “feeling out of place” at the *Gymnasium* is a case of misrecognition that creates insecurities (Bourdieu, 1999). Students might actually experience the *Gymnasium* as a school that is not for foreigners’ children who do not speak German as their first language, such as Eliano, who was born in Switzerland to Portuguese parents and hence had no Swiss nationality. The information events and the CEE registration site are only available in German, and the CEE comprises two challenging German exams as part of the CEE. Language-based inequalities and disadvantages at the transition were frequently discussed in Zurich’s elementary schools (see Reh and Landolt, 2024). Ronja, a Swiss middle-class girl who passed the CEE at *Rigi Gymnasium*, also questioned whether the transition actually selects the most hard-working and intelligent students. She mentioned that students who do not speak German so well should get a modified exam; one friend of hers did not pass the CEE because she spoke German as her second language (31_03_22_Interview).

6.2 Being important, deserving, and superior in a divided secondary school landscape

Few students challenged the narrative of the *Gymnasium* as a merit-based school for the brightest and most hard-working students as Eliano cautiously did. Most of the students in our ethnography who aspired to attend *Gymnasium* echoed the narrative of a meritocratic academic elite that earned and deserved its privileges due to hard work and intelligence. The students thus played a role in coproducing this legitimization of state-funded privilege production at the *Gymnasias*. When Emil, a student at *Piz Bernina Gymnasium*, talked about better amenities such as larger laboratories and libraries at *Gymnasias* than at *Sekundarschulen*, he explained that

the *Gymi* students deserve it because they wrote the *Gymi* exam and they passed and I don’t want to look down on them [the *Sekundarschule* students],

but I actually do. . . . So, it’s like hard-earned, yeah. . . . So, the *Gymnasium* students have [learned] half a year or maybe two years or six years for it, have prepared themselves, and it is just very deserved. (18_10_22_Interview)

Emil sees himself as deserving to have better amenities because he worked hard and passed the entrance exam, using the ostensibly merit-based admission to legitimize his privilege (see Halvorsen, 2022; Törnqvist, 2019). He also exhibits a certain feeling of superiority over non-*Gymnasium* students. Using Bourdieu’s understanding of field, we suggest that the students’ perceptions of the *Gymnasium* as a largely meritocratic school for the academic elite generates an understanding of their position in the hierarchical social space, as Emil’s quotation illustrates. In an interview directly after he had received the information that he had passed the CEE, he told Carlotta that “many want to go to the *Gymi*, but few make it” (24_03_22_Interview). These feelings of accomplishment and deservedness were strengthened by the admission ceremonies that the *Gymnasia* hold for their new students. Such admission ceremonies do not exist at the *Sekundarschulen*. The ceremonies at the *Gymnasia* are often attended by parents who take half a day off of work and sometimes even grandparents who travel to Zurich from abroad (22_08_22_Fieldnotes). Gabriel, a boy from a socioeconomically disadvantaged migrant background, described the *Pilatus Gymnasium* ceremony as follows:

There was the ceremony, the admission ceremony, we were in the church and there was a choir that sang for us. Afterwards, the principal got to know us, so we got to know the principal. The parents were all there too and sat upstairs. It was really cool. (03_11_22_Interview)

These ceremonies, sometimes held in the *Gymnasium*’s auditorium, sometimes in churches nearby to provide more room for students’ family members, were pregnant with meaning and made students feel important. They also learned to feel deserving. The ceremonies welcomed the students and also celebrated their admission into the privileged group of *Gymnasium* students. It was another event at which students learned to be proud of their achievements and of the venerable institution they now attended.

The students’ perception of the *Gymnasium* at the time of transition and their position as *Gymnasium* students also depends on their future aspirations and the understanding of which future paths the *Gymnasium* enables them to pursue. Students experience the transition as a crucial point in their life at which their future group membership and their potential for distinction are decided. Although a second opportunity to transition to *Gymnasium* arises after *Sekundarschule*, many students in our ethnography talked of VET as the only possible future after the *Sekundarschule*; even before they attend *Gymnasium* themselves. Madita, an upper-middle-class

student, explained shortly after she was informed that she passed the CEE that

the *Gymnasium* allows you to do more things, you can go to university, and at the *Sekundarschule*, you can only do an apprenticeship. (22_03_22_Interview)

The *Matura*, which enables direct entry to university, is seen as a prerequisite for a brighter and more successful future by most students aspiring to transfer to *Gymnasium*. Gabriel stated that

I wanted to go to *Gymnasium* so that I could develop further, so that I could go deeper into subjects, so that I would have more opportunities in life in the future. (03_11_22_Interview)

The belief that the *Gymnasium* offers the best education and the brightest future is shared by most aspiring students in our ethnography, especially those who have a disadvantaged migrant background (see Abrassart et al., 2020). They see the *Gymnasium* as a chance for social upward mobility. Often, only the academic path via *Gymnasium* is viewed as success by *Gymnasium* students. This furthers their coproduction of their superior status as they devalue the nonacademic paths and hierarchize students and their future ambitions and possibilities.

This division and hierarchization of the field of secondary schooling also influence the students’ friendships that they formed in elementary school and in their neighborhoods. Ida, a middle-class student at *Piz Bernina Gymnasium*, still occasionally meets with friends who transferred to *Sekundarschule*. She described a scene in her neighborhood’s youth club that illustrates how the hierarchization of the student body influenced her friendship. She said,

the other day I met friends who are at *Sekundarschule*. . . . At the youth club, there was someone who asked, are you all in the *Sek*, and my friends were like, yes, except for her, pointing at me, she’s the super smart one and is in *Gymi*. I generally have the feeling that maybe they have a bit of a feeling that they’re not as good as us. (26_10_22_Interview)

Ida was named by her *Sekundarschule* friends as being “the smart one”, but later in the interview she questioned whether she is generally smarter than them. She still clearly refers to “us”, the *Gymnasium* students, and “them”, the *Sekundarschule* students, and thus reproduces a certain divide. Gabriel and Emil, who also transferred to *Gymnasium*, said that they no longer have much contact with their friends who transferred to *Sekundarschule* due to their workload, different timetables, and new friends at the *Gymnasium*. This shows how the hierarchization of the educational landscape and the addressing of students at the transition influence the

students’ personal relations with each other. It might indicate how the “world of the *Gymnasium*,” as the *Pizol Gymnasium* principal called it, and the “world of the *Sekundarschule*” drift apart, resulting in fewer contact points between their students and potentially dwindling social cohesion.

7 Discussion and conclusion

This article’s first aim was to show how teachers, principals, and educational policy address students during the transition period and to shed light on the under-researched perspectives of students and their perceptions of exclusive public schools, which are influenced by such addressing. The article makes two contributions. First, it demonstrates how students at the transition period are strongly addressed as the merit-based academic elite that deserves to be treated differently from the majority of students and that students’ perception of the *Gymnasia* and their position in Zurich’s landscape of secondary schooling mostly echoes this addressing. The article argues that students learn to see themselves as deserving, academically superior, and valued through both verbal addresses by teachers and principals and an address by educational policies during the transition period. In this period, the *Gymnasia* are presented as stellar schools for intelligent, hard-working students, which gives them and their students a superior status. This also contributes to a divided and hierarchized field of secondary education in Zurich with the *Gymnasium* as the superior option and, in the perception of the children, a route to a successful future with more opportunities. Gamsu (2018) described a similarly hierarchized field of schooling in London, where elitist “super-state schools” (Gamsu, 2018:1171) dominate the field and allow both state-funded upward social mobility and social reproduction. But whereas the grammar school he studied largely mobilized traditional forms of cultural capital, mimicking British elitist private schools, Zurich’s *Gymnasia* do not mimic private schools; the public *Gymnasia* have a very good reputation but distinguish themselves from other school types by the different future possibilities they offer and the high academic selectivity.

Second, the article demonstrates the students’ agency in creating and legitimizing the status of the *Gymnasium* and its students but also in potentially challenging it. During the transition period, they receive distinction as academically elite and hard-working through the acquisition of certain types of symbolic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In this time, they actively distinguish themselves by coproducing particular images and prejudices about *Sekundarschule* students and *Gymnasium* students and thus contribute to the production of the distinction and symbolic capital associated with attending *Gymnasium*. Students play a role in creating an image of *Gymnasium* students as the best, brightest, and most hard-working ones who deserve privileged school spaces and treatment (see Yoon, 2016; Phillippo et al., 2021).

Most of the students who passed the CEE and attended *Gymnasium* after the summer also clearly distanced themselves from the non-*Gymnasium* others, often stigmatizing them as being less intelligent and interested (see Holt and Bowlby, 2019). Thus, they play an active role in legitimizing their positions as students with privileges that later enable them, for example, to obtain a university degree. The hierarchization of Zurich’s field of schooling that the aspiring *Gymnasium* students coproduce potentially results in local forms of “symbolic domination” (Bourdieu, 1985) of Zurich’s non-*Gymnasium* students. This can influence who feels a sense of belonging at the *Gymnasium*, as Eliano’s case showed; he perceived the *Gymnasium* as a place that is not for “foreigners’ children” like him with German as a second language.

The article’s second aim was to add a perspective from a country that did not widely introduce neoliberal educational policies and thus to move beyond the anglophone focus of the geographies of education (Henry, 2020). Our research has shown the importance of the local and national contexts in how Zurich’s educational policies contribute to the students’ perception of their privileged schools. But the students’ self-understanding as being especially smart and hard-working and their positioning as being superior and academically elite resonate with findings from more market-oriented educational systems at elite public grammar schools in England (Holt and Bowlby, 2019), highly selective magnet schools in Chicago (Phillippo et al., 2021), and highly selective “mini high schools” in Vancouver (Yoon, 2016). Rather than feeling that they are entitled elites (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009), students mobilize a meritocratic ideal and root their privilege in the understanding that they are the highest-performing students in their city or area. Principals and teachers similarly avoid the “elite” label for their *Gymnasia* and emphasize their meritocratic nature to legitimize their special status. This corresponds to research in other countries with less-neoliberal educational policies such as Sweden (Törnqvist, 2019), where schools have to position themselves in a discourse field of elitism and egalitarianism.

It would be interesting to investigate more thoroughly how students from disadvantaged backgrounds, both low socioeconomic status and migration background, perceive and experience exclusive and elitist public school spaces in the years following the transition period. The only disadvantaged student in our sample that passed the CEE and transferred to a *Gymnasium* was Gabriel (who only joined the ethnography after the CEE, as no other student from a disadvantaged background had passed); this exemplifies the underrepresentation of such students at these *Gymnasia*. Eliano, who aspired to attend the *Gymnasium* but did not pass the CEE, had the feeling that the *Gymnasium* was not a welcoming place for him as a non-Swiss student with German as a second language. Gabriel’s case indicates that such factors as the social capital children have acquired in elementary school (e.g., friends who transfer to *Gymnasium* with them), which depends on the socioeconomic composition of their school and

its transfer rate to *Gymnasium*, might play a role in disadvantaged students’ feelings of belonging or alienation. However, more research is needed on this topic. Our research also indicates a need for a better understanding of how hierarchized educational landscapes of secondary schooling potentially erode social cohesion when certain professions and educational paths are devalued by students who are likely to have more powerful positions in the future due to the cultural and social capital that they acquire in more privileged schools.

Appendix A

Table A1. Overview of the participating students.

Pupil CEE result	Highest education of parents	Migration background First language(s)
Eliano Failed	Upper secondary school	Parents migrated (Portugal) German as a second language
Sunil Failed	Upper secondary school	Migrated at 5 years old (Sri Lanka) German as a second language
Amara Failed	Post-secondary non-tertiary education	Parents migrated (Germany/Nigeria) German as first language
Emil Passed	Master’s degree	Swiss German as first language
Ida Passed	Doctorate	Parents migrated (Italy and Sweden) German, Italian, and Swedish as first languages
Madita Passed	Bachelor’s degree	Parents migrated (Germany) German as first language
Ronja Passed	Bachelor’s degree	Swiss German as first language
Gabriel Passed (joined after the CEE)	Upper secondary school	Parents migrated (Portugal) German as a second language

Table A2. Overview of fieldwork included in the analysis for this article.

Field visits related to the <i>Gymnasia</i> (field notes)	Information evenings at all six <i>Gymnasia</i> (three of them were online due to Covid-19), one of them together with Sunil Prospective parents’ tour at one <i>Gymnasium</i> Taster day at one <i>Gymnasium</i> with Madita Visiting a <i>Gymnasium</i> campus with Amara and her friend One non-profit CEE preparation course lesson with Gabriel, Sunil, Eliano (when students were shown the <i>Gymnasium</i>) Parents’ welcome evening at two <i>Gymnasia</i> Three school days at the <i>Gymnasium</i> with Emil and Ida Admission ceremonies at two <i>Gymnasia</i> Twelve meetings with the students at home/in their neighborhood
Recorded interviews analyzed for this article	All six <i>Gymnasium</i> principals All parents except Sunil’s and Gabriel’s All elementary school homeroom teachers except Gabriel’s Four <i>Gymnasium</i> teachers of Emil, Madita, and Gabriel All students (except Gabriel) directly after the CEE results were published and with Gabriel, Emil, Ida, and Madita after the first months at the <i>Gymnasium</i>

Data availability. The ethnographic data contain sensitive information and are not publicly accessible. Please contact the authors regarding any questions you might have.

Author contributions. The data collection was carried out by CR. Data analysis was conducted by CR. The writing of the article was mainly done by CR. SL and CR did the conceptualization of the paper together. CR did the revisions of the article. The supervision of the research, project management, and funding acquisition were done by SL. SL revised the paper.

Competing interests. The contact author has declared that neither of the authors has any competing interests.

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