

## RETHINKING THE BULGARIAN ELITE SCHOOLS

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**ABSTRACT:** THE PRESENT ARTICLE IS FOCUSED ON A RESEARCH OF SCHOOL CHOICE IN BULGARIAN CONDITIONS THAT BECOMES POSSIBLE THROUGH:

- THE DEGREE OF PARENTS' PARTICIPATION IN A DECISION MAKING;
- THE STUDENTS' AND PARENTS' EXPECTATIONS FOR A GOOD START OF CHILDREN AND THE BELIEF THAT THE GIVEN SCHOOL WILL GUARANTEE A PROSPERITY;
- THE READINESS OF CHILDREN TO FOLLOW THE CHOICE WHERE PARENTS HAVE A REAL IMPACT.

ALL THESE DETERMINANTS OF SCHOOL CHOICE ARE INFLUENCED BY STUDENTS' AS WELL AS BY PARENTS' OPINIONS AND POSITIONS. BESIDES, THEY SHOW HOW MUTUALLY PENETRATE THE PARENTAL PARTICIPATION AND THE ADOPTION OF PARENTS' VALUES BY WHICH THE DIFFERENT MECHANISMS OF SOCIAL CLOSURE OPERATING AND REPRODUCING EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES ARE REVIVED.

IN THE PRESENT ARTICLE THE BASIC THESIS IS THAT ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL PRIORITIES INHERITED BY FAMILIES ARE TRANSFORMED INTO SCHOOL PRIORITIES IN THE EDUCATION PROCESS. DIFFERENT SIDES OF THE ELITE SCHOOLS IN THE YEARS OF TRANSITION ARE FOLLOWED UP AND THE MAIN ACCENT IS PUT ON THEIR STUDENTS.

THE ANALYSIS IS BASED ON SEVERAL AUTHOR' SURVEYS CARRIED OUT IN THE PERIOD 1996-2005 CONCERNING THE ELITE BULGARIAN SCHOOLS AND ITS SOCIAL ACTORS. ONE OF THE BASIC CONCLUSION IS THAT ELITE SCHOOL IS A RESPONSE TO "SOCIAL ERRAND" FOR FORMATION OF AN ELITE; THESE SCHOOLS SUPPORT CONTINUITY BETWEEN PARENTS AND CHILDREN, EXPRESSING THEMSELVES AS AN INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISM OF SOCIALIZATION WHICH IS NEAREST TO FAMILY ASPIRATIONS AND HABITUS REPRESENTING AN INVESTMENT TRANSMITTED WITHIN GENERATIONS.

**KEY WORDS:** ELITE SCHOOLS, DETERMINANTS OF SCHOOL, SOCIAL CLOSURE, EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES, SOCIAL ERRAND, ELITE, FAMILY ASPIRATIONS

**THE CHOICE OF SCHOOL** is a rule that establishes the landmarks for future initiatives of the individuals. This is the period when the parents' influence over children is strong and it is connected with the family status and its political, moral and cultural characteristic features. Actually school choice is ruled by specific determinants of parents' social and educational identity, but it is also dependent of economic and financial living conditions. The hierarchic nets of places, contacts and information guarantee possibilities for an access to schools, specialties and professions, because, whatever social base of education becomes wider, whatever equality of possibilities is seemingly created, a hermetic structure of elite education and professions is preserved - inaccessible to some and attainable to others. In that sense, even when there is no expressed partiality to selection of students, its social character is preserved due to social definiteness of academic results. Through the internal mechanisms of selection the educational system sanctions and deepens the preliminary transformation of family privileges into educational ones. That is why the seeming of academic criteria as impartial actually realizes defensive functions concerning the existing public order.

**THE Bulgarian educational system** does not make exception from the general case of reproduction in some of its acts, while directing children towards one or another school

follows a conscientious parent' estimation and availability of capital – cultural and economic. As they suggest the meritocratic spirit of the system school success attains a symbolic image. We have to mention here that the variability of choices is strongly influenced by the model of the already existing family statuses. The most uncompromising in following their schedules, the most straight forward are the intellectuals.

**IT** is well known that exactly that social group clearly and distinctly understands the sense and value of education, notwithstanding the endured truth that (under Bulgarian conditions) the high educational status not always presupposes a highly paid position and prosperity in society. Nevertheless, the inertia of habitudes is so strong that they could hardly imagine any alternative of their children education; the latter (at least in parents' idea of good education) has to be obligatorily obtained at a foreign language school, in elegant surroundings of pairs.

**THE** maintenance of that idea is supported by the fact that intellectuals as a social group do not in general dispose of the resources of the economically prosperous and well-to-do strata, for whom private schools are affordable, easy and reserve variant for their children education. What is the situation with low status categories of poor and uneducated or with educated though poor social groups? Lack of resources for private lessons and preparation isolates those persons and their children as not likely rivals for an elitary education. Among them there are such individuals who do not actually care at what school, respectively in what environment their children would find themselves. There are some others, who are clearly aware of the importance and the necessity of favourable start coming with the good education, but due to lack of resources to support a living standard and conditions preceding getting to foreign language school, those families could not be real computers.

**IN** all cases though, entrance exams for the elite schools after the 7<sup>th</sup> grade exactly present the first confrontation with the reality of stratification al child's life, showing the high and unattainable lath for some and its easy overcoming for others. *The selection after the 7<sup>th</sup> grade* is the first real trial not only formally for the child, it is also a symbol of the real social labyrinths of poverty and lack of good conditions for education and living from the one side and wealth, guaranteeing its representatives a chance for an individual prosperity form the other.

**ONE** could clearly witness how social differentiation is expressed even at the "entrance" of the school system. Of course, that does not mean that the biography of a child is predestined of that those orientations, presupposed by parents would be necessarily or by all means followed and realized. It is a fact that overall child's performance at the primary school (with private language lessons as a rule) and later on at the grammar school is actually a preparation for the forthcoming exams. The choice of an educational institution after 7<sup>th</sup> grade reproduces some family characteristic features and also surrounds children with predictable in the sense of status parents' aspirations. Parents' ideas for the choice of a school are actually filtered through common group perspective and family experience. Parents do not make their choice under equal cultural and material resources.

**HERE** of course it may be argued that the individual's behaviour is to a greater event a fruit of his/her particular choice and it is exactly that choice that destroys the scheme of education determined by parents. That is because there are possible cases of ascending mobility (a movement from lower educational status to higher one) as well as opposite cases.

However, it is an undoubtless fact that high status families<sup>1</sup> even in the cases of not so acceptable choice of their children apply long, continuous and stable efforts to turn back the children to favourable, promising and preferred by parents' institutional niches. On the contrary, families of a lower social status have difficulties to cope with a socially unacceptable choice made by their children. From one side they lack cultural capital to avert the descending movements of the individual, and from the other side, they do not have an alternative to offer their children and which to withstand.

**I**N an educational market control is implicit and here school has to offer training expected by parents, so that it would guarantee continuity of family bringing up and expectations. The nature of that guarantee is determined by school traditions' reputation and for parents it means that in "buying" reputation they diminish the risk for their child not to succeed in life. More important, the different groups enter the market with different limitations on material and cultural capital. Which groups will be acting successfully on the market depends not so much on the participation in itself, but more on the cultural capital, on the knowledge of the rules of the game by the "customers".

**P**ART of the school reputation is determined by career development of the trainees and graduates, who have realized themselves in society, because in fact the guarantee school gives is that it recruits the appropriate statuses. The circumstances connected with the "implicit agreement" combine the diminishing of risk both for the educational institute and for parents as well. Under those conditions price would follow operationally competition market – legitimate or not, but always efficient and well organized. Thus "education market" might be understood uniquely in social terms, i. e. it works perfectly due to the nature of the social structure it supports and not because it stands for the perfect competition. Educational values, embodied into mechanisms of educational system urge parents and students to compete for places at high quality schools – they choose to take part in that competition and so they become part of the reproduction of the dominant culture: when they value one type of education and not another; when they tolerate particular skills and qualification, which actually are artifacts. Following of the dominant culture by families symbolizes gaining mobility resources through access to high status education. And so it turns out that school choice is one of the significant biographical acts. It is important to put an accent on diverse institutional nets where children contact and parents' effort to imagine children's success in different fields.

## THE "ELITE SCHOOLS" MODEL

**I**N general, characteristic features of such schools are: high level of selection, high quality of training and chosen homogeneous composition of pupils. It is an honour for many people to send their children to an elite school – a sign of prestige in society. That is why the term "elite school" represents also a social appraisal, because it produces definite type of "aristocracy" and privileges. I. e. social function of those schools is to create and sustain an elite through the relations between training, selection, power and ways of supporting those preferences. At the elite schools nets of contacts between schoolmates take a specific place, constituting the idea of selection as a part of the "brand". Just because of that elite schools

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<sup>1</sup> In the ideal case one can define high status families as those combining both cultural and economic capital, but rather often at least one of the components may be absent. The important prerequisite is that they have the potential to react and prevent their children – either thanks to their high educational level (as the most significant element of their cultural capital) or thanks to their economic qualification.

arise social interest – by high competition at the "entrance", by typical subcultures created as a result of selection, by social composition of the trained individuals. And because the idea of stratification of the system, of the place of the individual at the position structure is perceived as a socialization principle, as an important training mechanism, a moment dominating education, as far as the creation of an elite reflects not only on students, "who feel promised a good future" (Bourdieu et Passeron, 1970), but also on the others, destined to occupy lower levels of social hierarchy.

### ELITE SCHOOLS IN BULGARIA

**HAVING** in mind low level of education of the population, secondary schools classes in themselves represented a serious application for erudition and elitarity, as few could reach them until 9.09.1944 under Bulgarian conditions. The population was mainly rural, with little traditions in the field of education; maintenance of schools turned to be an expensive initiative. Statistical data indicated that in 1922 out of the 5009 school buildings available for primary schools only 1692 were suitable. The 3313 rest were only half-fit or absolutely unsuitable (Vankov, 1921). The Law of People's Education from 1924 intensified the tendency towards classical and humanitarian training in high schools. In 1934 in many towns secondary schools were closed and schools of two classes (4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> grade) were created, while full secondary schools were left only in some bigger towns (Atanassov, 1977: 317). There were also private schools; besides "big wigs" children – those of doctors, lawyers, and politicians – studied abroad.

**SOCIALIST** state started the formation of its own elite after 9.09. 1944. An important part of its training was teaching of a Western language. Thus naturally foreign language schools turn into institutions occupied with a secondary selection, where they train mainly children of Party staff and functionaries. That tendency was preserved in the following decades. In the years after 1990 foreign language schools appeared to become more open and more meritocratic, but they were in no lesser extent dependent of private lessons and financial privileges of parents.

**NOWADAYS** the most important specific feature of elite schools in Bulgaria is that that they train students passed through the trial of numerous entry exams. In that sense elite schools<sup>2</sup> are: foreign language schools, mathematical high schools, art schools, some vocational schools, where high competition between candidates presupposes a high degree of selection. At the same time another indicator for the definition of an elite school can be derived – the number of the candidates for those schools. In the last five years 71 percent of the candidates in the City of Sofia after the 7<sup>th</sup> grade have indicated among their first five preferences several foreign language schools – the German Language High School, the First English Language High School, the Spanish Language High School, the Second English Language High School, the French Language High School. Subsequently the entrance grades for those schools were the highest – in that order<sup>3</sup>. Thus selective process becomes possible

<sup>2</sup> The notion of an "elite school", according to **teachers** from a field study of private schools in 2003 was determined by: "qualitative choice of students" at the first place, followed by "material basis" and the availability of "highly qualified teachers" (Boyadjieva, 2003)

According to parents elite school is that with "a steady place." In the educational system, guarantees "successful passing" to a higher level, has its "own image", "academic and well-meaning atmosphere" (Boyadjieva, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> For that reason for the following analysis under the notion of elite schools we shall be having in mind foreign language schools.

and standing for meritocratism becomes a reality, just because of the great number of candidates and one can select the best among them, in that case the individuals with the highest grades.

**THE** secondary education in foreign languages is substantially directed towards more detailed instruction and young people who are oriented towards it go there on their own will, with different motivation, but always with the conscience that the education they get is something necessary and important for their individual existence and for their value system. At the same time the orientation towards high vocational schools is not one and the same and changeable, because individuals with their hopes are influenced by different economical, political, cultural conditions, and there is an effect of particular marketeering moment and occasional circumstances.

**FROM** that point of view it is interesting to study the process of choice at contemporary elite language schools, to observe the background and the environment where students study and teachers teach. Such a study would permit to follow the technological function of elite formation, respectively the reproducing role of school. On the other hand it is necessary to establish whether and to what extent the elite schools respond to the idea of "equality of educational possibilities"; do they give a signal that they create and maintain conditions for that?

### CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF ELITE SCHOOLS

The definition of elite schools is developed on two levels:

- ⇒ Family section, connected with the origin of their disciples: educational, professional and economic profile of the surroundings.
- ⇒ Institutional section, connected with selection, spirit of competition, professionalism of teachers; and what is consequently reflected in general – competitive power of graduates.

**ELITE** schools show the following important features, which distinguish them substantially from the other secondary educational institutes (the idea belongs to P. Boyadjieva):

1. High degree of selectivity at the entrance in the choice of pupils;
2. Competitive spirit and great competitive power of graduates of foreign language schools in continuing their education at higher schools;
3. A specific individual profile of teachers, combining high professionalism with higher expectations and demands from students.

**FOREIGN** language secondary schools to a greater extent than general education schools are identified as places for confirming meritocratic standards, supported by teachers' demands as well. Of course we cannot idealize, but in general, on the back ground of the decreasing quality of education and that was shared by all the Inspectorate experts, as well as by the interviewed teachers, foreign language schools were to a lesser extent influenced by devaluation of educational grades and marks.

**THE** label "Elite school" expresses itself in all the elements of school environment – teachers, education quality, and students' abilities. In the process of thoughts we somehow get lost in what is prerequisite and what is a consequence, what is cause and what is the result, as able students demand and suppose highly qualified teachers, and the latter stimulate the

intellectual development of their disciples, their aspirations and ambitions. But that is only on the first glance because within the framework of an elite school predominant place and sensible role is given to selection, starting at the "entrance", passing through the training process and at the "exit". It is organically connected with the notion of capital.

**ELITE** is defined as such compared to other social actors thanks to that it exceeds them and the key to its excellency is capital – economic and cultural. Thus elite – selection – capital produces a chain of connections, showing interdependence, determination and fusion.

**CULTURE** capital of families at elite schools is specific, but it is also a preference, because it becomes a natural prerequisite for admission and educational achievements of children. Cultural capital ensures a step forward to its owners and their chances for prosperity. In another words, real differences, established by social and cultural quality of families are transformed in the process of training into school differences alluding to achievements, realized and demonstrated in the classroom.

### INSTITUTIONAL LIFE

A decisive role for the incorporation to school world and of the adoption of its model of organization play the different forms of collective life, leading to establishing of generally shared standards and socializing a feeling of entity. As a result a true general culture is created – an ensemble of legitimate knowledge and opinions, manners, typical school slang phrases, forms of jokes, ways of movement.(Bourdieu, 1989: 111). In practice the establishment of solidarity between schoolmates and imposing general harmony aiming at socializing of definite habits is a continuous process taking several years. Institutional life is directed towards leveling of characters, towards adaptation of individuals to collective activities and tolerance. In constructing of conscience for the entity, the individual seeks to necessarily submit to it and to take account of it.

**THAT** socialization is connected with a whole system of durable schemes of thinking, of perceiving, and of spirit of life, which are to motivate students for their acts. Ultimately the deep and intimate sense of elite school is to carry on socialization without any outside influences, without perplexing random and purposely bad contacts. Selection aims at combining a homogeneous group and the main concern of parents is, ensuring their children the necessary economic capital to guarantee conditions for its preservation and reproduction, to create those prerequisites for their inheritors to meet their mates. School is aimed at production of such social actors, recognizing and conforming to limits, putting them in or out of community. Selection aims at demonstrating the superiority of the chosen, at legitimizing their distinction. Thus individuals are distributed in classes homogeneous as possible and at the same time diverse. And notwithstanding competition, opposing students, a definite solidarity and bringing together "similar to similar" (Bourdieu, 1989) is developed.

**MOREOVER**, the aim is also to create a new community, members of which take part in the symbol capital of the group. Entering an elite school presumes a several years of training the task of which is a definite type of socialization – creation of a routine, adoption of definite rules and traditions, valid for all disciples. Through preliminary preparation emotional and cognitive attitudes are constructed, because the acts exerted upon the novice change the ideas the latter has of himself and the others. According to Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1989: 198) institutional symbols in contemporary societies fulfill a function very close to that of nomination habits and the bary name of the school, a nomination act, shows to those given a

particular social destiny. The succession of acts of introduction is connected with imposing of mutually shared standards of recognizing of their own position and its difference or identity with that of the other individuals, because taming into traditions of community is a slow and continuous process, presupposing conformity with hierarchy, with authority, with strict rules and norms established decades and sometimes even centuries before.

**THE** ultimate effect consists of incorporation in school and its meanings, in adoption of principles of school life. Repeated many times through the years, weeks, days, they start living unconsciously within individuals. Strict observation of the order is a part of the tolerated everyday rhythm, observed by teachers, students, and administration. Without that those schools would lose part of their specific subculture, refinement, feeling of self-respect and socialization and maybe the strength of the established connections would not be so great and nostalgia, often connecting former classmates would not be so deep. The subculture of elite schools creates a feeling of access to knowledge, unfamiliar to uninitiated. At the same time it is aimed to construction of a consensus, necessary for the self-consciousness, future identification and mutual support between disciples.

**CONSENSUS** is a way of imposing the "closure" of social limits. And although non-formal training seems to look somewhat scattering, it turns to be extremely important, because it presents a formation aiming at producing an elite, initiated, recognized and conscious of its dignity to be such. Thus selecting those, defined as the most gifted, school increases their self-esteem. Training at elite schools is aimed at adoption of a symbolic construction of world. That process may be absolutely decentralized and may not include any specific teleology, although it is influenced by the specific cultural activity of the individuals. Ultimately, symbolic forms ensure the direct context of socialization, confirm personal identity and "create a feeling for things".

**THAT** invisible act is realized through the effect of status definition, deriving from attachment to a place and position (Bourdieu, 1974). Creation of continuity of individual and communal time constructs correspondence between system of values and norms and the existing external order. This essential model is one of the possible means of recognition of mechanisms, allowing school to attract individuals, found themselves "in", making them conforming to its demands for perpetuation of the available structures. That is why it may be said that socialization at elite schools succeeds thanks to the fact that individuals are in a certain sense shaped after the expectations of the institution itself. Every one of typical school acts – exams, praises, high marks, prizes, are at one and the same time results and causes for school achievements, which in their turn stimulates recognition of education values and thus impels a round process.

**IN** that context we have to underline the policies of the administrations of the respective foreign language secondary schools, where schoolmasters prefer to employ as teachers former graduates. When the author had a talk with the schoolmistress of the First English language school she argued that it was very important for her as former disciples turned into educators can transfer that unchangeable experience which other features do not dispose of. Besides according to her institutional spirit of the school was carried on exactly because of transfer of traditions and teachers took an especially active part in the process. The wholesale training process at elite schools is aimed at constructing not just an engaged attitude towards real conditions, but at forming attitudes towards inclusion of actors in social processes and statuses, to which they feel attached. The set of principles, meanings, orientation, language patterns of the participants in school interactions as a result of socialization behind school

walls is reflected in particular act and behavioral attitudes. We have to bear in mind that school spirit is by no means arbitrary and independent. It is constructed and cultivated for years and behind that reshaping and nivelating the of characters, of adapting individuals to communal life and specificity of collective activities and tolerance stand the idea for the future and expectations about it. Elite schools deepen social differentiation as a product of two distinct forms of capital – economic and cultural. From the other side they play a decisive role in structuring of economic and political elite and that is a means of understanding of the sources of power in society.

**EARLIER** was suggested that elite schools respond to a "social offer" for a formation and socialization of elite; that in certain cases they can support a definite element of continuity between fathers and children in this country as well. We especially emphasized on the fact that 61% of students from the non-representative sample had parents graduated a foreign language school. That fact in itself is demonstrative of raising elite school in rank as a recognized institutional mechanism of socialization being nearest to family expectations and aspirations. In that aspect we have followed up cultural capital including educational and professional profile of parents, cultural practices, activities and tastes, valid both for families and for children as well. It turned out that disciples of elite schools have similar attitudes and they participate in close cultural practices; it is not by chance that they gradually homogenize their environment in the years of training. It follows from this that creating a new community of mates; elite schools have to guarantee along with accumulation of knowledge also a construction of prerequisites for getting in stable nets of friends.

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