



Elite Schools: Multiple Geographies of Privilege
Edited by Aaron Koh & Jane Kenway

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Reviewed by Burke Scarbrough, University of Minnesota Duluth

Abstract

*This review of *Elite Schools: Multiple Geographies of Privilege* discusses how Aaron Koh and Jane Kenway's edited collection contributes to the study of privilege by applying a spatial lens to the study of elite schools. The book articulates a powerful challenge for scholars to analyze the multiple and overlapping scales on which elite schools are always defining themselves, and the thirteen chapters that follow offer geographically grounded insights about how privilege works in diverse educational spaces. The studies in this book help to make concrete the work that students and schools do to locate themselves locally, nationally, transnationally, and globally.*

Keywords: *privilege, elite schools, spatial analysis, sociology of education*

For many educational researchers, an agenda to seek equity involves focusing research energy and resources on historically marginalized youth, along with the educators, institutions, and policies that impact them. But can a critical analysis of disadvantage be complete without a complementary understanding of educational advantage? Laura Nader (1972) raised this question in her influential call for anthropologists to “study up” the social hierarchy, and more recent work (Stich & Colyar, 2013) has re-affirmed the importance of studying social class relationally—understanding that “the accumulation of privilege is implicated in the deepening of poverty” (Weis & Fine, 2012, p. 177) and that research illuminating mechanisms of educational advantage is an important part of an agenda to dismantle educational disadvantage.

A large body of work has taken up that call, some of it under the banner of “the new sociology of elite education” (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2011). Recent studies of elite schools include analyses of what sorts of resources and practices are available to the admitted few, how those few make sense of their advantages and of why other people don't have them, and how race and gender mediate different students' experience of elite schools. As this literature has grown, perhaps no one has been more active in pushing for richer understandings and new analytic directions than Aaron Koh and Jane Kenway. In 2015 alone, they co-edited a special issue of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* focused on fresh perspectives and under-examined research sites, and Kenway worked with Adam Howard to co-edit a special issue of the *International*

Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education focused on methodological challenges and possibilities in research on elites.

In that editorial work, and in their own empirical studies, Koh and Kenway focus on bringing to light how privilege and elite education work differently in different local and national settings, but also how they respond to similar transnational and global forces shaping our social world. Their new edited collection, *Elite Schools: Multiple Geographies of Privilege*, recognizes that “privilege arises in different spaces and places and on various scales” (p. 2), and the book seeks to navigate these overlapping spaces. A spatial view of privilege understands elite schools to be actively producing themselves as certain kinds of places, and charges researchers to analyze how they are pulling it off—particularly given that space is always contingent and contested, and could have been produced differently than it has been. As contributor Howard Prosser argues in the book’s final chapter, it is to the advantage of elite schools if the rest of us treat their eliteness as something that just “is”; by understanding eliteness as something produced and reinforced historically, and at enormous cost to others, a careful researcher can avoid conceding a school’s elite status and instead interrogate the processes through which that status is produced—indeed, bought and sold.

But analyzing how eliteness is produced, and how those processes vary within a given school and also across schools, and how elite schools are locally embedded but also nationally embedded but also globally shaped, and how they occupy physical and virtual space, and how they are historically produced but also produce history, and how the advantages they confer are ideological and social and also material...this is a lot to pursue, the sort of thing that is easy for editors to call for and harder for empirical studies to analyze with clarity and rigor. Still, this theoretical richness is the hallmark of a vibrant literature in development, and the thirteen chapters of *Elite Schools* charge right in.

Perhaps the strongest impression a reader might get from the collection as a whole is of the tensions and dialectics through which elite schools produce themselves. Many chapters abound with accounts of hybrid identities and ideological balancing acts, all of which complicate easier or more static notions of what it means to be (and attend) an elite school. Wee Loon Yeo’s chapter traces how Asian males at an Australian boarding school draw on norms from both home and school to construct particular notions of masculinity. A chapter by Moosung Lee and colleagues, and another by Chin Eh Loh, examine the tensions within Asian International Baccalaureate (IB) schools to groom future international business leaders while also adhering to the IB’s curricular emphasis on open-mindedness and service. And chapters by Radha Iyer and Caroline Bertron consider in quite different ways how particular schools position themselves vis-à-vis well known international networks of elite schools; some find it to their benefit to align themselves with larger networks of exclusive schools, while others find it useful to distance themselves from such networks. Indeed, several chapters describe schools from different parts of the world all hard at work constructing themselves as deeply embedded local or national institutions while also recruiting and shaping global leaders. In the broadest sense, it is probably not surprising that schools try to market both a local identity and a transnational identity. The power of those chapters is in beginning to illuminate the discourses that make space for all of these multi-scalar identities.

In some cases, the chapters in *Elite Schools* take influential concepts in the study of privilege and apply them to settings that are underrepresented in the literature, as so much sociology of elite education has focused on schools in the United States and the United Kingdom. For instance, Gaztambide-Fernández’s (2009) heuristic for what makes an elite boarding school—based on a study of U.S. schools—is cited in several chapters, giving those authors a foothold to establish

schools in Australia, China, and India as “elite” amid all of the geographic contingencies that can complicate such characterizations.

Other chapters deepen our understanding of well-worn sociological concepts by grounding them in places and social ecologies. A common refrain in literature about elite schools is that students at such schools develop valuable social networks that confer advantages on them throughout their lives. This claim about social capital is often more theoretical than empirical, but Shane Watters traces the existence of actual “old boy” alumni networks in elite British schools and describes the sorts of networking and career services that those networks provide. Another refrain about elite schools is that they develop well-rounded cosmopolitan “cultural omnivores” who are at ease in a broad range of cultural settings (Khan, 2011). Yujia Wang revisits the concept of “well-roundedness” through the eyes of Chinese students attending an elite Australian school, some of whom find themselves marginalized as they discover the practices that count (and don’t count) for being “well-rounded” in that setting; as these youth reveal how some sports are celebrated more than others and artistic endeavor is only valued when it leads to performance and competition, they show us the culturally contingent nature of “well roundedness,” opening up for critique a term that many elite schools construct as self-evidently good.

Like most good edited books, *Elite Schools* gains its strength from making available these sorts of connections across chapters. Individually, several of the chapters make their major claims on the strength of a handful of interviews or a few passages or images on school web pages, and it remains for future research to confirm and/or elaborate the theoretical gestures these brief chapters provide. The chapters also vary considerably in how—and how much—their analytic approach is recognizably spatial. In this, I would argue, they are in good company; nuanced spatial analysis is still a vanguard in education research, and a research community inches forward by offering each other just such disparate examples. But most importantly, this collection’s spatial grounding and its contributors’ geographic diversity successfully forecloses pat conclusions about how privilege works. Koh and Kenway are at their best for this field when they resist any emerging consensus and ask an ever more challenging set of questions about how educational (dis)advantage is being constructed around the world.

In this spirit of raising ever more questions, I feel compelled to add a brief coda. 2016 was a fascinating year in which to read about the “elite,” particularly while living in the United States. I write just weeks after a billionaire real estate developer and television star (and elite university graduate) was elected President following a campaign that harnessed—among other things—populist scorn against political “elites” and relentless deflection of fact-checking as the work of partisan media “elites.” Criticizing the powerful for political gain is certainly nothing new, and there might be nothing about this political moment that is inconsistent with the major forces of inequality and power that educational researchers are tracing. Nevertheless, Koh and Kenway remind us that a spatial analysis of privilege brings to light the inherently “contested geographies of wealth, privilege, and exclusion” (Pow, as cited in Koh & Kenway, 2016, p. 4). From important lines of scholarly critique in works such as *Elite Schools* to the populist political moment currently unfolding across several spaces, there is much to learn about how privilege is being not just produced but contested, and in what forms, and in whose interests.

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Burke Scarborough is an assistant professor in the Department of English, Linguistics, and Writing Studies at the University of Minnesota Duluth. His research focuses on secondary literacy pedagogy and the role of summer in youth learning and development. His dissertation focused on the construction of educational advantage in an elite American boarding school’s academic summer enrichment program, and he is currently developing an edited collection that will examine diverse ways in which educational (dis)advantage is constructed during summer vacation in several countries.