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Research article

The prestige economy of elite education: a Baudrillardian analysis of an aspirational English school

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Abstract

Academic entrepreneurial behaviours are increasingly a research field paralleling processes of capitalist commodification. We mobilise Baudrillard's concepts to probe a school's strategic communication methods symbolising class neoliberalism, which aspirational parents may experience as a desired habitus of 'distinction'. We suggest their knowledge of class and education, once imported into the interpretation of this school's web presence, will coalesce with its simulacra of elite education. Our account encourages comparisons with selective school websites and utilises the qualitative data on the public site of this school, a methodological approach that has been fruitfully utilised by scholars uncovering the ideological representations created by providers who market UK higher education. The intervention into the marketplace of the selective fee-paying English education of Independent Grammar School: Durham (IGSD) through such a penumbra of symbolic meaning forms part of its pursuit of a competitive edge. International studies

of schools chasing prestige and consumer desire confirm that the policies and practices described have become widespread, as shown in the oeuvre of Stephen Ball, whose writings inform the approach of this article. The marketing of the 'brand' identified through our theoretically driven analysis may encourage consumers to opt out of the state sector. Neoliberal-class markers of prestige contribute to the erosion of welfare-oriented school ideals in England, and in other nations.

Keywords Baudrillard; class; elite; English; education; prestige; simulation; tradition

Introduction

We argue that a politically neoconservative entrepreneur from academia has sought to exploit the perceived shortcomings of the English state school public sector through the introduction of a hybrid model of school education. The latter has potential to be scaled up nationally with political support. The policy and societal significance of this attempted 'Trojan Horse' lies beyond the fact of this individual school and particular entrepreneur, as this article demonstrates. The entrepreneur is Professor James Tooley, a key originator of the institution called Independent Grammar School: Durham (IGSD). We argue that the projection of this selective school product is mediated through a simulacrum of elite preparatory private schools, whose status and design have notable similarities. It is designed to appeal to a certain category of parental consumer with more limited economic and social capital than parents who can access the expensive existing class-based selective system in England. Our education policy critique seeks, through a case study of this school's website, to mobilise Baudrillard's sociological concepts to deconstruct the process of 'seduction' that IGSD instigates through its engineering of elite simulacra of traditional fee-paying English preparatory school education. The social anthropologist Ward Keeler (2021) argues that trying to compensate for your own structural weakness means looking up. Through this subordination, Keeler (2021: 21) argues, you win their 'engaged attention, and with it, rewards'. The demography of the market that IGSD potentially aims to capture is perhaps that which Keeler (2021) includes in her anthropological analysis. The locus of this article's emphasis is framed through the concept of 'prestige economy', supported by Baudrillard's concepts. In a prestige economy, patterns of exchange stand outside the financial economy, but are related to it. Respect and standing are indicators of esteem that can be traded for tangible rewards (Coate and Howson, 2016). Prestige constructs social categories, and offers markers of status and class affinity (Duncan, 2021; Fuh, 2012).

On 31 May 2018, the academic-business entrepreneur Professor James Tooley launched, with colleagues, the 'no-frills' fee-paying Independent Grammar School: Durham. Following Ball (2009), IGSD is an education business that, to help establish itself, utilises the human desire for indicators of prestige in a porous marketplace, which parents must decode. We argue that this Durham educational innovation in selective schooling, a rival to local state schools, aims to 'outbid' the English state school sector by the promise of a superior product. At £3,300 per school year per child for the academic year 2021/2, IGSD annual fees are markedly lower than the annual costs for a private education. The substance of this 'offer' resonates with social class hierarchies in an economy of prestige. The IGSD website's cultural symbolism projects markers of this prestige economy. Many state schools similarly desire to enhance their prestige through niche-making paraphernalia, including branded uniforms and other markers of 'distinction' that endorse a valued symbolism of belonging to networks that connect with class elitism. IGSD demonstrates elements similar to prestigious Charter Schools in the United States, in that neither fit into a common understanding of education for all, as these elements foster a reputation similar to elite private schools and serve advantaged community members, giving rise to gentrification and segregation within urban neighbourhoods. Charter Schools and IGSD both require parents in local communities to be active in applying for a place, rather than gaining one through residence in the catchment area, appealing to the family demographic of dissatisfied and aspirational parents. Brown and Makris (2018) argue that they divide and gentrify urban areas.

International studies report that school and prestige combine as important for parents who regard them as vehicles for socio-economic mobility (Kuwata, 1998; Macpal, 2021). Some authors comment on the role of race in the marketisation of schooling systems in South Africa, coining the term 'racial

neoliberalism' (Hunter, 2020); arguably, in England we have class neoliberalism. Ball (2014) identifies education policy as an international phenomenon of commodification and privatisation. We argue that the projection of this selective school product is mediated through a simulacrum of elite preparatory private schools. It is designed to appeal to an 'active' category of parental consumer whose financial and social capital does not enable access to the existing class-based selective system in England. Our education policy and practice critique utilises a qualitative case study methodology and applies it to the school's website. The terms 'Independent' and 'Grammar' in the name of IGSD direct the gaze of consumers to esteemed class relations conjoining with hope of eventual economic reward (Melldahl, 2018).

We research the question we raise about the construction of prestige through the efforts of an academic entrepreneur by drawing out comparatively the imagery and verbal nomenclature of IGSD and its established rivals in the market. That approach is informed by a website analysis underpinned by concepts borrowed from the work of Baudrillard. Baudrillard argues that consumption is a mechanism for the articulation of class status in the capitalist economy (Gane, 1993). While there might seem to be ethical issues associated with naming individuals and places, this material is already in the public domain. Our interest lies in capturing the phenomenon of a privatised 'affordable' schooling. The study is an opportunity to depict the strategic privileging of England's social class structure, manifested by appeal to English public-school elites. The power and appeal of the English class structure embedded in elite private schools – Harrow, for example – is incorporated in the projection of IGSD through its exploitation of prestige marking symbols designed to position it within renowned elite networks.

Case study

Educational prestige and authority occur in the discourse mobilised by IGSD (n.d.-a: n.p.) on its public website:

The vision of The Independent Grammar Schools (of which IGS: Durham is the first) is built on the significant experience of James Tooley, Vice Chancellor of the University of Buckingham and formerly Professor of Education Policy at Newcastle University, who has a global reputation in the establishment of low-cost private schools across the world. Professor Tooley has seen impressive results from this approach in many countries as far afield as Ghana, Nigeria, Honduras, and India.

Following Ball, the professional CV conveyed on the IGSD website is evidence of globalising neoliberal policy geography and its importation into a UK setting (see Tooley, 2013, 2014, 2016; IGSD, n.d.-a). Parental choice of schooling is a mechanism of status differentiation, and, in the case of elite English public schools, it perpetuates hierarchies of power and masculinity which damage society (Verkaik, 2018). Ball (2012b) describes the transformation of education policy into global monetising brands designed to attract new markets within capitalism. Ball's (2012b) vision is that such change signals the erosion of state education in its welfare form. An umbrella of local autonomy is being swiftly replaced by chief executive officers appointed by multi-academy trusts with multiple interests besides schools, and with no obligation to consult local communities (Farris, 2022). Our case study tracks the construction of opportunity presented to aspirational parents to gain an elite positional good (Melldahl, 2018). The registered proprietor of IGSD is The Education Partnership (UK) Ltd, a private limited company listed in the register of Companies House as a business concerned with pre-primary education, primary education and educational support services. The Department for Education (DfE, 2022a) states that IGSD offers a 'Christian ethos', and refers to a roll of 44 students, with capacity for 65. IGSD is a low-cost English private school established by Professor James Tooley and colleagues John Gray and James Stanfield in 2018. It is obligatory to be registered with the DfE (2022b) in England to qualify to open as an independent school providing full-time education to five or more students of compulsory school age.

The concept of independent school in the UK refers to a private school or public school, or to any British fee-paying school, that is free to set their own curricula and to enjoy freedom in the choice of their students, and that is not dependent on government or local authority finance (Gateway School, n.d.; Good Schools Guide, n.d.). The independent grammar schools in England (ages 11–18) are now fee paying. IGSD caters for a younger age group (ages 4–13) and resembles the average English preparatory school (ages 3–11 or 3–13). These 'prep' schools include Hendon (fees: £15,600 per annum), Buxlow (fees:

£9,657 per annum) and Alpha (fees: £11,685 per annum). At a mere £3,300 per school year per child for the academic year 2021/2, IGSD fees are generally lower than the fees of state and private education. For the 2019/20 academic year, average fees for a private day-school pupil at a junior school were £14,481 (ISC, 2022: 17), while in a state primary school average fees were £5,200 (Sibieta, 2020: 2). Consequently, one could question IGSD's long-term ability 'to provide a comprehensive curriculum, including music and a foreign language, at the "affordable" price offered' (Shah and Holligan, 2021: 121). The inclusion of the term 'Grammar' in IGSD's title distinguishes it from Durham School, an established independent day and boarding school in Durham. Durham School is inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), a body approved by the Secretary of State for Education for the purpose of inspecting independent schools under Section 162 of the Education Act 2002 (DCSF, n.d.-a). The Durham School website details in depth the academic and professional biographies of governors and staff. The annual fee for day pupils at the prep school level (Years 3–6) (2020/1) at Durham School is £11,943 (DCSF, n.d.-b).

Methodology

We recognise that the empirical purchase of our methodology is limited by the relative scarcity of data on the school's website. We provide a form of document analysis which would be strengthened had we the opportunity, time and access to pursue an ethnographic approach that included interviews with parents and staff. The critical deconstruction of the ideology of the IGSD public website includes attention to class and national identity. A qualitative paradigm privileges the importance of interpreting 'reality', seeing it as socially constructed and governed by socio-historical contexts (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2014). Baudrillard argues that we consume meaning through product advertising (Smith, 2010). Our analysis is framed within the neoliberalism that Baudrillard recognised (Blair, 1994; Collins, 2017).

The use of the internet for product marketing is an area of scholarly and business enterprise focus (Al-Tabbaa et al., 2021; Conway et al., 2012; Dade and Hassenzahl, 2013). IGSD's public website as a multilayered document is therefore theorised within an interpretative paradigm. Critical analysis explores the operation of ideology which legitimates and maintains forms of power (Jupp and Norris, 1993). The analysis attends to the role of narrative themes in the discourse of IGSD (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Colour images of students, places and general ambience feature prominently in the identity construction of IGSD, accompanied by textual statements. We elicit comparisons of IGSD with established English prep schools, helping to contextualise the article's argument that selected simulacra project class privilege as a commodity form (Ball, 2002).

Theoretical framework

Baudrillard is a controversial theorist whose work includes consumption (Butler, 1999). Baudrillard's theorising of education is readily deployed in critique: a recent policy analysis utilising Baudrillard found that European assessment policy is a pan-European simulation that fabricates 'dreams of success' to policymakers, despite the unworkability of the policy (Krejsler, 2021). In the current study, Baudrillard's conceptual toolkit is harnessed to theorise 'affordable' private education in the historic English city of Durham. The choice of Durham is not accidental: it is the location of elite schools and the esteemed Durham University. As a 'showroom', Durham is ideal for marketing IGSD: imagery in postmodern societies is a mechanism that governs consumer socialisation, taste construction and lifestyle projection (Sonnekus and Van Eeden, 2009).

'Baudrillard's world' is a post-truth universe through which 'simulacra' circulate, utilising established material realities (Baudrillard, 1994; Harvey, 1990; Richmond and Porpora, 2019). Baudrillard's oeuvre introduces corporate capitalism's system of production and consumption, and globalising cultural equivalence (Baudrillard, 2003). Baudrillard opposes the commercialised world of images and its shallow capitalism (Vaughan, 2010). His concept of simulation conjures not a false conception of the social world, but rather a construct of a 'real' world described as hyperreal; consciousness struggles to differentiate reality from simulation of that reality (Hegarty, 2008; Kaneva, 2018). Simulations introduce a play of signs supported by an aura of objectivity (Krejsler, 2021). Simulation, we argue, constructs an affordable world of what appears to be elite education. Ball's (2009) analysis of state education identified education businesses in the UK and overseas operating by pushing corporate logics, expansionism,

diversification of product and competition around profit motives. As the state drifts towards more politically conservative, elitist, neoliberal market policies, the education system might collapse into that trajectory, and we anticipate this leading to a proliferation of simulations of education provision, encouraged by policy and practice (Ball, 2009; Sass, 2015).

Theoretical analysis

In this section, we focus on two thematic areas: the simulation of elite educational values, and its translation into English traditionalism. Baudrillard's concepts are deployed to illuminate ideology couched within the school's website (Gane, 1993). The decision to site the school in Durham is unlikely to have been accidental: class structures associated with this prestigious historic city with a renowned university provide a suitable symbolic envelope for projecting elite education, a process familiar to sociologists of education exploring this phenomenon in London (Gamsu, 2018, 2020). Baudrillard draws attention to modernity's play of simulacra and appearances. The sociology of higher education websites highlights design aesthetics and their mediation of corporate representations about prestigious ladders of status hierarchy in the UK (Dwyer et al., 2021; Graham, 2013; Papsen et al., 2004). Taylor (2021) argues that UK fee-paying schools, especially in the Clarendon group of Harrow, Charterhouse, Eton, Merchant Taylor's, Rugby, Shrewsbury, St Paul's, Westminster and Winchester, whose former students occupy positions across elite occupational, political and academic constituencies, are a gold standard of independent education. Meanwhile, working-class students attending state schools deemed to lack appropriate forms of capital experience the same lack of class mobility as their parents (Willis, 1981). In the following two sections of the article, we engage, by means of the qualitative method analysing meaning, with the evidence base for our theorising. The prism of a class-inflected analysis underpinned by Baudrillard's analytics continues to inform the article's overall narrative thread.

Elite simulation

Durham School website's Photo Gallery coalesces symbolically with IGSD's class neoliberal iconography. Both schools link to an ecclesiastical building, and to images resonating with English conservative values of taste and tradition. It is useful to juxtapose two fee-paying schools in geographic proximity to compare the characterisation of symbolic meaning sought by the creators of an 'adventure in provision' (Bowditch, 2019). IGSD's simulation includes stereotypes of class behaviour and 'look': images of stone buildings and constructions of the middle-class children at 'play' and 'study' are exemplary notions of innocence, safety, care and suitable peers. The IGSD internet site 'Gallery' shows 46 colour images, mobilising visual appeal. Most of the images denote disciplined learning and academic tradition, with images of school uniform, artistic and musical activities, and supportive collaborative learning in a local woodland. The IGSD school is located within a traditional red-brick Victorian building, an imposing traditional architectural space, which Walford's (2021) analysis of class and education confirms is significant.

Comparison of IGSD with widely known exemplars of established elite schooling provision also illuminates our analysis. Hendon Preparatory School (n.d.), founded in 1873, reveals that besides outdoor learning, music and games, the school website also foregrounds academic opportunities and success, including destinations into prestigious public schools such as Westminster. A similar exemplar of elite education is Buxlow Independent Preparatory School (n.d.), founded in 1927. Its website also displays photographs of students experiencing school in terms of the existing elitist cultural capital displayed by established Hendon Preparatory School. A third exemplar of the 'real' is Alpha Preparatory School (2023), founded in 1895. IGSD's website marketing foregrounds photographic imagery that suggests 'soft' levers of class coupled with self-assured children whose 'poses' project a habitus of cultivation. A habitus of engineered class cultivation has been documented through interview-based studies of class and schooling in England by Reay et al. (2011) and Reay (2007). According to Baudrillard (1994: 3):

To simulate is to feign to have what one doesn't have ... But it is more complicated than that because simulating is not pretending ... 'Whoever simulates an illness produces in himself some of the symptoms' (*Littré*). Therefore, pretending, or dissimulating, leaves the principle of reality intact: the difference is always clear, it is simply masked, whereas simulation threatens the difference between the 'true' and the 'false', the 'real' and the 'imaginary'. Is the simulator

sick or not, given that he produces 'true' symptoms? Objectively one cannot treat him as being either ill or not ill.

The simulation of elitism entails attention to a model of the English education classist tradition. In the French educational system, Bourdieu (2010) demarcates two 'cultures': the lifestyle of a dominant social-intellectual class in France (*haute bourgeoisie*), and the aesthetic choices of the different trajectory of a poorer class who are unable to appropriate middle-class forms of 'distinction' or taste, illustrated in hobbies, reading choices and lifestyle generally.

Simulating traditionalism

The marketing of this simulation of the 'real' is articulated in the following extract from the IGSD website, which defends a distinctive competitive 'superiority' that IGSD (n.d.-a: n.p.) conveys:

The values and high standards traditionally associated with a Grammar School education will characterise all that your child experiences at IGS: Durham. There will, however, be no selection based on ability. We believe all children can achieve their personal best within an atmosphere of stretch, enjoyment, and academic rigour. As an independent school we will pursue the best of the national curriculum but add our own distinctive flavour to it. This means we will teach what many would describe as a traditional curriculum in a traditional style, focusing on a thorough grounding, through repetition and consolidation where necessary, of basic skills and knowledge.

'Distinction' is embodied in the IGSD website's adoption of indicators of symbolic capital. Special provision available at IGSD is highlighted through its decision to publish visual iconographies of cultivated child-centredness and studious child well-being. 'Distinction' further embraces an implicit anti-modern pedagogy through a historical discourse of traditionalism expressed as 'basic skills and knowledge', and the absence of ability-based entry selection. A language of standards sits within an iconoclastic account of the school:

For us, low cost does not mean low quality. It does not mean 'cheap and cheerful'. What it does mean is that we will focus on what makes the difference in education. That is not money. It is people. The heart of our school and its defining characteristic will be the highest quality of teaching from teachers who simply love to be in the classroom with children. Of course, we will have good resources, but the expression we have often used to describe our vision for a low-cost school is 'no frills'. We will not participate in the 'race to the top' which sometimes characterises private schools. This involves constant, unsustainable investment which, in our opinion, is contributing to the increasing unaffordability of private education for all but the richest in our society. (IGSD, n.d.-a: n.p.)

IGSD adumbrates the allure of its iconoclastic radicalism (market niche) by foregrounding its social and moral values, as well as a somewhat paradoxical othering 'Us versus Them' of expensive ('unaffordable') private schooling. IGSD's othering undergirds a project to achieve 'distinction' in an English education marketplace that taps a perceived grievance of a disaffected demography of parents feeling othered from both state and 'real' elite provision, and who seek access for their children to a vision of lost traditions of stability.

'Distinction' parallels the simulation elite education advertised at IGSD. The adoption of this product elevates aspirational parents, such as consumers of US Charter Schools. A mantra of choice coalesces with the individuality of neoliberalism. IGSD's simulation of elements of elite schools' offers is projected by representations that include the 'typical school day' enjoyed in its 'recently refurbished Christchurch Durham building'. Historical and religious tradition resonance enlarges the 'distinction' communicated through the school's website:

A typical school day at IGS: Durham comprises Maths and English in the morning and then an afternoon of mainly topic work. Sport and Music are included at appropriate times ... Maths and English focus on providing children with the essential skills. Repetition and rote learning are common. Times tables are learned thoroughly and mastered by the end of primary school, if not long before. Major emphasis is given to grammar, spelling and punctuation ... Central

to these lessons will be the teaching of British Values. These lessons are incorporated in our assembly programme. (IGSD, n.d.-b: n.p.)

This deployment of a traditional education curriculum lexicon (Maths, English, skills, spelling, punctuation, British values) conveys a simulation of rigorous traditional learning governed by methods of teaching that limit student autonomy and play. The ideology represents a return based on nostalgia to a lost world of teacher-centred classrooms. IGSD education and values are listed as Courage, Respect, Excellence, Achievement, Transparency and Enjoyment – moral values that IGSD can legitimately claim it shares with Greek and Latin mottoes of the British private-school system, including the Outward Bound movement. These prestige indexes privilege mantras of individualistic character formation. Insiders find opportunities to develop social closure against those judged to be outside the elite entrance (Buisson-Fenet, 2013; Wilby, 2013). The Outward Bound movement was fashioned on the ideas of aristocratic German educator Kurt Hahn, who held a ‘traditionalistic’ view based in muscular Christianity (Seaman, 2020). It is seen as a ‘cultural island’ embedded within capitalist relations, discourses of youth identity formation and personal growth humanistic ideology which legitimated the neglect of social, political and economic dimensions to individual problems (Freeman, 2011; Seaman, 2016). Kurt Hahn helped establish several schools, including Gordonstoun, the elite boarding school in the Scottish Highlands attended by King Charles III and his father (Van Oord, 2010).

Discussion

Ball (2016), drawing on the case of educational reform in India, suggests dispensing with methodological nationalism and adopting instead approaches taking account of policy mobilities and policy actors operating outside the state, who nevertheless impact the competition state’s policy interior (see also Ball, 2002, 2007, 2012a). Ball recognised that global discourses are always recontextualised within national policies (Lingard and Sellar, 2013). IGSD’s national and international landscape lies within the network of neoliberalising education policy that utilises desires for gaining social class credentialism and upward mobility. The purpose of this article is to contribute to understanding an avenue of academic entrepreneurialism and, in the case of a school, the wider policy architecture of English education and the appeal of social class meaning within unfolding hierarchies of English schooling. We have sought to leverage that contribution by giving close attention to the symbolic resonance of the case study school ‘offer’ through the prism of Baudrillard.

Walford’s (2021) study of elite school provision in terms of the architecture of buildings notes how the cultural geography of many English elite private schools is situated within repurposed English country houses and inside listed historic buildings. Walford (2021) conjectures that positioning is designed to project their esteemed class ‘distinction’, stability and heritage ownership belonging. The architecture of the repurposed Victorian church building described parallels Walford’s recognition of this entity’s status and material links with the elite English school estate. Acknowledging that aspirational vein, Keeler (2021), as noted, argues that trying to compensate for your own structural weakness means looking up. Through this subordination, Keeler (2021: 21) suggests that interested parties win ‘engaged attention, and with it, rewards’, by accessing prestige and class credentials.

The Durham affordable school model also has traction as a signalling strategy to political classes that comparatively inexpensive options exist to help remediate a putative failing state sector. IGSD has already achieved England’s DfE recognition and has, therefore, to that extent a credible model, but whether or not it can address the enduring attainment gap in education is another question: some might argue that it will reinforce inequalities of schooling access and outcomes (Brown and Makris, 2018; Verkaik, 2018). Although this conservative class and education mindset is unlikely to enhance the mobility of many individuals at the base of the English class hierarchy, it will offer a platform to critics of state education to deride it even more. The existence of such a school is a potential avenue for some families to gain a felt experience of social mobility, and to gain a marker or badge of social distance from a perceived humdrum state collectivism.

This neoliberal classism appears to represent the introduction of a back-to-basics vision of a nostalgic loss of a traditional British education. Parents who feel that their offspring are failed by the state system will feel rescued by the reality encoded by IGSD’s symbolic traits (Wright, 2008). Public education is vulnerable to undermining along many vectors: neoliberalism has transformed the teaching workforce into a ‘directed profession’, and compliance and performativity diminish a teacher’s capacity to adopt

critical perspectives (Daly et al., 2020; Rayner and Gunter, 2020). Our contribution to education policy is timely, as public education in England continues to be subjected to central government interventions, pushing state schools previously governed by local education authorities beyond that ambit, into compliance with market forces where curriculum control is informed by a capitalist business-oriented leadership class (Martin and Yarker, 2021; West and Wolfe, 2021). The rise in the prestige of Charter Schools in the USA has coincided with the marginalising of other, less advantaged, local families, a trend that is also likely to occur in England, if examples of the model described proliferate.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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