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School choice and the commodification of education: A visual approach to school brochures and websites

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Abstract

As subjects of the parental right to choose (DES, 1988), parents are called upon to fulfil certain duties and responsibilities when choosing a secondary school for their child, with the expectation that they might navigate the school system ‘successfully’ and become ‘better informed consumers’ (DCSF, 2008). To comply with these rules of citizenship parents are encouraged to make use of a variety of information on schools as part of a realistic and informed choice, one that is consummate with their role as consumer-citizens. Such ‘cognitive mapping’ is evident in school brochures and websites where choice is assembled on the basis of visual iconography and narrative terrains. This leads to a consideration of how choice is visually mediated and communicated through the circulation of symbols and the structure of narratives. To explain these phenomena, I analyse and compare the ways in which two all-girls faith secondary schools attempt to (further) define themselves, culturally, historically and pedagogically, in a crowded field of choice. I conclude the paper with a discussion of the benefits and insights generated through a visually orientated approach to the study of school choice.

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Introduction

Since the introduction of the 1980 and 1986 Education Acts and the 1988 Education Reform Act (1988) in Britain, the relationship between parents and schools has been subject to a number of radical policy innovations and political interventions in which parents – once considered to be ‘passive’ recipients of education services – are now incited to behave as ‘partners’ (DES, 1991) or ‘consumers’ (DCSF, 2008) of education services. In their role as consumers, parents are encouraged to assess and compare schools on the basis of formal information generated through school inspection reports and raw performance data provided and monitored by the government, as well as make use of subsidiary forms of school evaluation supported by the availability of school brochures and websites, parent–teacher exchanges and school visits. Much like corporate entities jostling to win the hearts and minds of consumers, schools now appear to be encased in a ‘business ontology’ (Fisher, 2009: 17) predicated on a zero-sum game of capturing consumer appetites with arresting images and language that promise a competitive and unique service delivery. To illustrate this point, this paper disentangles some of the communicative aims underpinning the promotional role of school brochures and websites, focusing on the visual and narrative (or ‘storied’) form as a medium for communicating and translating ideas around tradition, community, curriculum, localism (or parochialism) and globalism.

Despite increasing evidence of research on the market role of school brochures and websites (Copeland, 1994; Hu and Soong, 2007; Maguire, Ball and Macrae, 1999; Oplatka and Hemsley-Brown, 2004; Symes, 1998), there has been insufficient attention given to explicating how school choice discourses are visually mediated and communicated through these forms of promotional material. In an effort to redress this neglect, this paper draws on elements of discourse analysis (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2005) to trace how meaning is anchored or embodied through the visual design of school brochures and websites. This has implications for thinking about how schools work to define themselves, culturally, pedagogically and historically, in a visually mediated field of choice, and how this symbolic and material work is achieved through the visual arrangement of particular referents. Through mapping the ways in which elements of school culture and school organization are indexed through the content and form of images and texts, I address the significant contribution visual methods can make, theoretically, methodologically and substantively, to the study of school choice.

The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section I offer a critical policy analysis of the neoconservative-liberal political interventions and economic rationalities framing the trajectory of market trends in British education policy

discourse. This is followed, in section two, with a discussion of the strengths, limitations and guiding principles shaping the application of visual methods in the social sciences. Section three brings these methodologies and perspectives together through a discourse analysis of school brochures and websites. I conclude the paper with a summary of the arguments made and, in turn, discuss their implications for possible future research.

Acting responsibly: The neo-liberalization of education

Central to government policy and political strategies in Britain since the 1980s has been a move towards creating citizens who are engaged and discriminating consumers, with the aim to restructure public services so that the welfare rights of citizens become conditional on individuals exercising forms of self-help and self-responsibility – a kind of democracy for the committed (Clarke et al., 2007; Dwyer, 1998). In their role as consumers, parents are nudged into adjusting their attitudes and values to fit with an instrumental rationality that privileges competitiveness and autonomy (Oria et al., 2007; Reay, 2008). As a corollary, schools and local authorities are expected to appeal to and educate parents as bearers of consumer rights and responsibilities (DCSF, 2008), in effect co-ordinating and enforcing the injunctions placed on parents to choose and behave as consumer-citizens. The government appointment of choice advisers (experts who assist parents with the handling and preparation of their school choice) reflects the dominant character of these policy and political experiments, and can be read as government attempts to keep parents in check, procedurally and rationally.

In conjunction with the government requirements set out in the Education and Inspection Bill 2006, local authorities are required to ‘provide a Choice Adviser service targeted at those who most need support in navigating the secondary school admissions process and in making informed and realistic decisions about which schools to apply for in the best interests of their child’ (DCSF, 2009: 91). Specifically, these services were designed to identify parents who are reluctant to engage with the choice process, and thus can be understood to be implicated in technologies of the self and struggles to solicit parents to think and behave in ways that reinforce a consumerist or ‘active’ orientation to public services. In this framing citizens are domesticated within public choice discourses as rational and responsible individuals who are ‘basically egoistic, self-regarding and instrumental in their behaviour, choosing how to act on the basis of the consequences for their personal welfare’ (Dunleavy, 1991: 3).

The debate concerning what it means (or should mean) to be rational and responsible is fraught with tension and ambiguity, however. As Reay, Ball and their colleagues emphasize, parents negotiate their school choice around contradictory and sometimes conflicting moral and social class sensibilities, values

and aspirations (Ball, 1993; Reay et al., 2007, 2008). This has led some researchers to criticize and challenge the narrow rational, utilitarian perspective of choice which presupposes all parents share the equal capacity to augment themselves successfully in the role of consumers (Gewirtz, Ball and Bowe, 1995). Viewed through a libertarian paternalist perspective (Thaler and Sustein, 2008), choice advisers constitute 'soft' government attempts to redress this imbalance through guiding parents into making decisions akin to consumers in a marketplace – rational, deliberative and informed. As Millar (2006) correctly observes, however, choice advisers are government funded employees who operate within the ethical and legal remit of local authorities, and as such are unlikely to assist 'lower-income families compete with the [choice] tactics used by the better off'. As described in a work of satirical fiction that popularizes the middle-class obsession with choice, *The Battle for Big School*, these tactics can include 'moving house or shifting their front gate a foot to one side to fall within the catchment areas; parents lying about their postcodes, selling body parts to pay for private school, tutoring their children into nervous breakdowns' (Tucker, 2007: 16).

In reality, some of these tactics (e.g. 'lying about their postcodes') are quite common despite their ethical and legal implications: parents who submit false information on their school application are liable for criminal prosecution (Shepard, 2008). However, it might be considered short-sighted to read these tactics in psychological realist terms as a problem concerning the private inclination of some individuals to commit welfare fraud (i.e. as a problem restricted to a few over-zealous middle-class parents). Instead, these forms of misrecognition might be read differently as commensurate with the de-politicization of self-interest: they galvanize the neo-liberal drive towards atomistic individualization (parents cheat because they are basically self-interested and rational, i.e. who act on the basis of their child's needs). Such thinking also runs the risk of oversimplifying or missing entirely the bigger issue, which is that market logic dictates that parents compete for school places as calculating selves (as consumers, as risk-takers, as rational utility maximizers, etc.), making school choice a political-structural problem. We might note the way in which British Prime Minister David Cameron championed the figure of the 'active citizen' in no uncertain terms as a self-maximizing, clinical opportunist – someone who basically 'plays the system' (quoted in Webster and Elliott, 2008). As Oria et al. (2007) observe, the narrow rational, economic reasoning of this argument serves to generate an ethical framework in which the pursuit of competitive familial advantage is naturalized as both legitimate and necessary. In other words, the incentive (even compulsion) among parents to behave self-interestedly is inscribed into the values and attitudes that characterize school choice, with its concentration on acquisitive, calculating behaviour and zero-sum thinking. Using similar recursive logic, Zizek (2009) points to the seeming impossibility of dissociating financial speculation with its risk-taking incentives from a burgeoning economy. He concludes: 'what if "moral hazard" is inscribed into the very structure of capitalism?' (2009: 13). The potential for 'moral hazard' can also

be viewed as systemic to the structure of market rules and prerogatives that shape contemporary forms of welfare governance in Britain. The consumer is simply 'unmanageable' according to Gabriel and Lang (1995).

It is evident from the growing research on school choice that not all parents behave in the same way that governments might presuppose and demand, however; namely, as clinical, cold, unemotional choosing subjects (Wilkins, 2011a). On the other hand, parents do appropriate consumer vocabularies and attitudes in order to satisfy and rationalize 'personal' values and commitments (Reay et al., 2007, 2008; Wilkins, 2010). Hence, a common criticism levelled against the policy and practice of school choice (or more generally consumerism in welfare) is that it undermines collective associations and relations that engender commitments to the public ethos (Needham, 2003) or social democratic conceptions of citizenship (Marquand, 2004), class equality (Reay and Ball, 1997), diversity or social mixing (Reay et al., 2007) and the tenacity and endurance of the imagery of community (Wilkins, 2011b). The scope of this paper is not concerned with reciting or adding to these arguments, however (see Ball, 2008, for a discussion of these debates). Instead, it seeks to understand and conceptualize the discursive and material role of school brochures and websites as elements implicated in the commodification and visual saturation of education as an object of consumption. This merits a consideration of the innovative and creative possibilities offered through a visually orientated approach to the study of school choice discourses.

Visually mapping the field of choice

Since early visual anthropology researchers across a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, psychology, education and media research, have readily taken up visual approaches in their studies of culture and everyday social life. While early pioneers of the visual approach utilized images primarily as devices for illustrating and supporting empirical text or observations (Edwards, 1992), researchers working in the 1970s (Becker, 1975; Goffman, 1979) elected instead to conceptualize how everyday objects and relationships are socially and technically constructed through the circulation of images – what might be termed a 'visual culture approach'. Implicit to their approach was a rejection of the idea that images are neutral or unmediated reflections of 'objective truth'. Instead, images came to be viewed cynically and pragmatically as exercises in power and ideology, leading to the now dominant notion that 'all photos lie' (Goldstein, 2007). In ideological terms, the social function of the visual image becomes a reflex of the power interests it seeks to promote or conceal (Eagleton, 2007). Goffman's (1979) semiotic analysis of the way in which gender discourses and myths are perpetuated through the stylization and positioning of men and women in print advertisements, for example, signalled a paradigm shift and a move away from the conventional modes of observational studies epitomized

by the documentary and realist traditions of early visual methods. Subsequently the 'realist ethnography' that characterized attempts by early visual anthropologists and visual sociologists to utilize photography and film as support structures for their observations came to be supplemented in the 1980s by postmodernist, critical theory and cultural studies perspectives and concerns (Emmison and Smith, 2000).

Implicit to these perspectives is an emphasis on the polysemic nature of images; specifically, the idea that visual representations are culturally and historically embedded. From this viewpoint, images need to be analysed within the broader social context in which they are produced and consumed (Pink, 2005). In a similar vein, the postmodern critique of documentary photography asserts that the meaning of an image is likely to shift and mutate according to the cultural perspective of the viewer, with the implication 'that the recipient ... is a co-creator of it' (Eagleton, 2003: 96). In this way, it is important to consider who the image might be seeking to address or represent and how this is achieved through the articulation and mobilization (or erasure) of particular cultural and historical referents. What kinds of meanings are generated through school photos, for example, and how do these symbolic fictions support contexts in which parents can be addressed as subjects with particular cultural preferences, tastes or concerns? Through exploring the ways in which concepts and practices of tradition, community, culture and ethnicity are mediated and assembled through the visual iconography of school brochures and websites, this paper endeavours to offer such an explanation. What is omitted from this analysis, however, is a consideration of how school images tend to be 'consumed' (interpreted, translated and understood) differently by parents. A broader engagement with parents' responses to school brochures and websites would therefore have certainly enriched the data analysis (see Ball and Vincent, 1998, for a discussion of this topic), but it is a research concern that extends beyond the scope of this paper.

In the same way that some cultural studies researchers draw on elements of semiology (or semiotics) to study the manufactured cultural myths generated through image production (e.g. see Fink, 2008; Grosvenor, 2007; Margolis, 2000), this paper investigates and interrogates how socially circulating discourses are translated through the application of visual imagery (Pink, 2005). To do this, I draw on and compare selected images and texts taken from the promotional material used by two London state-funded secondary schools: Elwood and Greendale. Both Elwood and Greendale authorized the use of this material as data for my analysis, with permission to replicate the images as part of the empirical analysis. For ethical reasons I have used pseudonyms to replace their real names; in some instances, deliberately cropping images which bear the name of the school. The images I have elected to analyse in this paper were selected on the grounds that they appear to be eliciting similar structures of religious feeling through the framing of people, places and objects, and on the basis of themes of localism and globalism or cosmopolitanism.

While Elwood and Greendale demonstrate distinctive approaches to how they choose to brand and market their services to parents as consumers, both schools share some important similarities that make them analogous to each other and interesting to compare. Firstly, both schools are faith institutions with priority for admittance given to baptized Roman Catholic children. Second, the student intake for each school is predominantly girls (the exception being that the gender of pupils in the sixth form at Elwood is mixed). Third, both schools are situated geographically in the same borough, region or 'field of choice' – sometimes referred to, affectionately, as the 'local family of schools' (Osley, 2008). And lastly, both schools are voluntarily aided, which means that up to 90% of their capital costs is provided by the government while an outside sponsor (in this case, a Catholic organization) contributes the rest and has majority influence in running the school (i.e. admissions criteria, curriculum, school ethos, etc.). The majority of secondary schools in this particular borough of London are either community, foundation or voluntary-controlled (usually directly funded and controlled by the local authority, with a mixed gender and religious student intake that relies on an open, non-discriminatory admissions process) or, in the case of Elwood and Greendale, voluntarily aided. On this account, there appears to be very little difference between Elwood and Greendale in terms of student intake, religious identity, geography and funding agreements. However, as Ball (2006) observes, Roman Catholic secondary schools tend to generate their own patterns of competition. Upon closer Ofsted inspection, for example, there appears to be a number of distinct elements that differentiate Elwood and Greendale as specialist education providers.

In 2009 Elwood received overall a satisfactory inspection report from Ofsted, achieving average inspection grades with levels of pupils' attainment at the end of Key Stage 4 said to be close to the national average. The report stresses Elwood as a school that 'despite the challenges of an extremely dispersed student intake ... does much to promote racial harmony and celebrate the immense cultural diversity in the school and local area ... with a good understanding of the needs of the ethnically very diverse school community'. In contrast, Greendale achieved overall an 'outstanding' inspection report from Ofsted in 2007 (the most recent published report). But how does each school attempt to communicate these strengths (or conceal particular weaknesses) through the use of school brochures and websites?

Corporatizing schools: Crowded spaces, manufactured myths

In what follows I analyse and compare how Elwood and Greendale engage in similar strategies of using impression management and branding techniques to communicate and delineate their position in a crowded space of choice.

As I will demonstrate, each school defines itself in visual and narrative terms through a number of canonical discourses, including, although not exclusive to, tradition, community, curriculum, localism and globalism (or cosmopolitanism). I will discuss each of these discourses in turn, drawing attention to the ways in which each school attempts to communicate these constellations of ideas differently through the visual and the narrative (or 'storied') form as interpretative devices for anchoring meaning.

Founded in 1830 and declared to be 'one of the oldest girls' Catholic schools in London', Elwood traces its pedagogy and history to 'the French Revolution when the Abbé Carron came to England to minister to the French exiles who had settled in Oxtou [real place name changed] ... From an industrial school it grew into a convent boarding school; then to a day school with pupils of mixed ability who were able to afford fees; next it became a selective non-fee paying grammar school and finally a comprehensive school. Throughout all these changes, the F.C.J Sisters have taught in the school'. Despite the mutating character of the school over the last 180 years – from industrial to convent boarding, convent boarding to mixed ability, mixed ability to grammar and, finally, grammar to comprehensive – Elwood locates its distinction and appeal through the enduring legacy of the pedagogic teachings of the F.C.J (Faithful Companions of Jesus) Sisters. With ministries and professional and lay colleagues operating across the world, the F.C.J Sisters represent a global consortium of Roman Catholics with influences that span and cultivate the ethos and organization of different public and private institutions, ranging from spiritual and refugee centres for women and homeless people to primary and secondary schools. Viewed through a critical discourse perspective, the F.C.J Sisters perform the ideological-symbolic work of locating Elwood within a utopian-global religious narrative that is structured around themes of continuity, permanence and order. (Ironically, too, it doubles as a kind of utopian-local narrative in which the global translation of religious sentiment and charitable giving is transposed or re-coded into comfortable feelings pertaining to localized expressions of security, predictability, safety and settlement; an observation that is further explored later on.) The F.C.J Sisters, therefore, function as a kind of symbolic utility to indexing Elwood, spatially, temporally and culturally, as a site linked to the preservation of the residual elements of a past culture. This echoes Fisher's (2009) argument that the stranglehold of 'capitalist realism' on both emergent and residual forms of culture is so that the reality of culture has become indissociable from its simulacrum and symbolic investment.

In a similar vein to Elwood, Greendale invokes a set of matching discourses to define itself historically, culturally and pedagogically: '[Greendale] was founded in 1861 by the Sisters of La Sainte Union who are its trustees. The congregation has a long tradition in education both at home and abroad ... At the heart of the school and in the spirit of Jean Baptiste Debrabant, our founder, are the teachers and support staff. We are both the custodians and developers

of his vision'. In both descriptions, the connection between past and present is used effectively to give validity and appeal to the school and its teaching staff as carriers ('custodians') of tradition and religious culture. What is invoked here, then, is a strong vision of each school rooted in a nostalgia for the past. In terms of curriculum and teaching, also, both Elwood and Greendale appear to share a celestial concern with infusing education with a religious and spiritual experience. Elwood stresses the importance of a 'holistic approach which encompasses the mind, body and spirit', for example, while Greendale seeks 'to educate the whole person, academically, socially, spiritually and morally through a curriculum based on Christian principles'. Despite these seemingly analogous self-descriptions, however, each school works hard to distinguish itself as a specialist education provider. The government emphasis on greater transparency of 'diversity' in the British school system (DfES, 2005) – where diversity refers to the specialization and division of education provision – means that secondary schools are required to further differentiate and individuate themselves on the basis of 'particular characteristics' that signal their effort to tailor services to individual wants and needs. But how does each school communicate 'particular characteristics'?

These characteristics are defined in advance according to a set of government-approved specialisms or domestications (i.e. 'City and Technology Colleges' and 'Community and Foundational Schools'), and as such can be viewed as policy technologies or dividing practices implicated in the ideological work of generating a field of educational choice. Elwood, for example, has been awarded 'the specialist college status for combined excellence in humanities and visual arts', accredited by the quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization (or quango) Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (SSAT). Set up in 2005, the SSAT works independently to enforce accountability and manage performance among schools in the absence of direct government intervention (e.g. local authority management) and offers accreditation which recognizes, quality assures and benchmarks a programme, institution or school. The curriculum and teaching focus of Elwood, for example, is anchored through the visual logos in Figure 1a and 1b (which are affixed to their webpage). In contrast, Greendale has been domesticated by the SSAT within the parcelled discourse of a 'specialist science college with mathematics', as demonstrated through the visual logo in Figure 1c (also affixed to their webpage).

Such a bifurcation is important in the way it echoes and redeems what Snow (1964) calls the cultural divide or splitting that characterizes the model of many capitalist Western education systems; namely, the distinction that is often made to separate the arts and humanities from the sciences. Although we might resist framing this divide in cultural terms as a conflict between interest groups who share opposing 'cultural' views or beliefs, it is interesting to note the extent to which school choice discourses mediate and are supported through what Snow then identified as Britain's 'fanatical belief in educational specialization' (1964: 17).

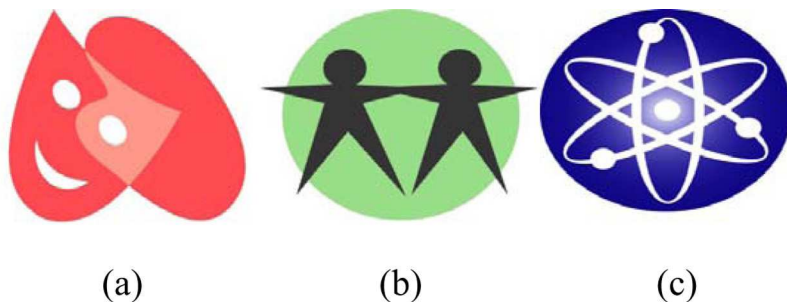


Figure 1. Logos appearing on the websites of (a, b) 'Elwood' school and (c) 'Greendale' school; both names are pseudonyms. Reproduced with permission



Figure 2. From Greendale's website. Reproduced with permission

In what follows I analyse and compare how meanings of tradition and community are effectively communicated through the visual representation of Elwood and Greendale, pointing to how socially circulating discourses become objectively ironized and transformed into artefacts for the private act of consumption (namely, the process of choosing a school).

Evoking a strong image of tradition, and associative ideas of continuity, hierarchy and even, arguably, 'filial piety' (a respect for origins and ancestors), is the image taken from Greendale's website (Figure 2). These interrelated ideas and beliefs are communicated most powerfully through the building itself, with its elegant sliding sash windows which run from the floor to the ceiling, cast in the style of neoclassical Georgian architecture (or Regency architecture). The



Figure 3. From Greendale's website. Reproduced with permission

brick-fronted building, with its handsome square-fronted symmetrically planned windows, picturesque clump of trees and hedgerow, generates a strong image of upper-class grandeur, solidity and affluence. The combination of a calm luminous sky and wide open green space and unspoiled surroundings complements the staging of an Arcadian setting through communicating a dominant impression of tranquillity, regularity and order. The entrance door and ground-floor windows are flanked by pilasters, adding to the elegance of the building and, in particular, to its enduring history as an 'old' building. Viewed in this way, the rigidly stratified floors, typical of most Georgian architecture, give an impression of social prestige and unspoiled, enduring culture. Indeed, the decorative horizontal band (or strong course) on the exterior wall, used to mark out and separate the floors, conveys a strong image of hierarchy and order and the enduring presence of the school through history and time. This structure of feeling appears to be echoed through Figure 3, also taken from Greendale's website.

The blacked out figures in the foreground (rendered identical through their lack of colour) may be contrasted with the visual spectacle of the school in the background: illuminated by colour and light, the composition of the image underscores the enduring history of the school and its passage through time, matched only by the representation of an ageing tree. Like the presence of the sturdy tree at the centre of the image, the school communicates elements of something permanent, stable and constant, as against the incomplete and fleeting character of the figures in the foreground. In a similar vein, Elwood utilizes the architectural magnificence conveyed through 'old' buildings to



Figure 4. From Elwood's website. Reproduced with permission

communicate a sense of structure, history and grandeur, in particular, a desire for a past order of social relationships.

As demonstrated in Figure 4, taken from Elwood's website, the use of 'old' buildings conveys a strong impression of a past order of social relationships based on a way of life that is felt to be more predictable, stable and protected. This is communicated most effectively through the projected rusticity in which the school is presented in monochrome (black and white) or 'classic' composition.

The black and white imagery works to connect the school to some imagined past and locate its history within a fixed, unchanging and enduring set of relations and (invented) traditions. Both Figure 2 and Figure 4 (and the impression of the school overall) are similar in that they combine shrubs and small trees with a clear arching sky, thus conveying to the viewer fanciful interpretations of a calm, peaceful, idyllic setting. This has the effect of generating an inclusive notion of community, as evidenced by Figure 4: the building is imposing by the way it is presented as an enclave overseeing the space of the courtyard, with the implication that the school works to insulate people within a space built upon ideas of settlement, predictability and security. Moreover, the buildings look on to each other, fashioned as a kind of courtyard, serving to heighten a sense of inclusion and surveillance. This structure of feeling is matched by the way in which the trees and shrubs positioned in the foreground of the image have the powerful effect of making the viewer feel like an outsider looking in.

I will now focus on some of the differences between Elwood and Greendale, in terms of how each school relays messages around discourses of parochialism (or localism) and cosmopolitanism (or globalism). As illustrated in Figure 5,



Figure 5. From Elwood's website. Reproduced with permission

Elwood attracts a student composition of mainly Black African and Black Caribbean girls (or, at least, that is the strong impression generated through their school brochures and websites, where the majority of images display a disproportionate number of Afro-Caribbean girls). This carries implicit meanings around community and localism where the emphasis appears to be on serving locally defined 'needs' and expectations. Elwood for example boasts a commitment to the tradition of church-based 'praise music', namely gospel choir singing, which has strong links with members of British Afro-Caribbean communities (Broughton, 1996). The visual iconography in Figure 5, then, reflects engaged attempts to invoke or identify a local structure of feeling based on perceived shared understanding, values and aspirations.

In contrast, Greendale sets itself up in more cosmopolitan terms as an 'international' organization that extends beyond the remit of the local: 'As a Catholic community we are part of a local, national and universal Church ... Fundamental to the successful education is the partnership between governors and staff, pupils and parents, parish and wider community'. Through the articulation and combination of spatial and temporal metaphors of the 'local, national and universal', Greendale frames the ethos and culture of the school within a cosmopolitan imagination that evokes concepts of plurality, multiculturalism and globalism. As part of Greendale's 'Global Generation' project and 'International School Status', for example, students are encouraged to participate in events that facilitate the transmission and exchange of intercultural ideas and perspectives, underscoring the cosmopolitan character of the school. This is best illustrated through the composition of Figure 6. It captures



Figure 6. From Greendale's website. Reproduced with permission

female students of diverse ethnicities mingling together in the foreground, situated against a backdrop displaying national flags from around the globe.

Conclusion

In this paper I have critically analysed how two schools work to define and delineate their position in a competitive school market, and how they do so through the seduction of particular referents related to discourses of tradition, community, curriculum, localism and globalism. It is important to consider, however, that these meanings are constructed with specific audiences in mind and therefore might symbolize different things for different people. The images analysed in this paper, for example, suggest that the idea of community as a spatial and cultural metaphor stands at the intersection of competing versions of localism and globalism. We might even be tempted to read these discourses through the lens of social class as plugging into certain forms of social class tastes or preferences. For Ball (2006), there are two types of parents: 'cosmopolitan' or middle-class parents and 'local' or working-class parents. The former are defined by their strong inclination to be more wide ranging in their school choices, often selecting schools outside their immediate local area. In contrast, the latter are thought to value proximity and nearness and therefore view locality positively as a site for the reproduction of familial and community relations. Although I don't want to force an interpretation which reduces these images to moments of social class articulation, it is interesting to note the contrasting themes of localism and globalism or cosmopolitanism evident in the school

brochures and websites. This highlights the need for further research around the seduction of these discourses in the context of parents' school choice.

Adopting a visually orientated approach has enabled me to explain how school brochures and websites function as proxies or support structures for policies of choice and 'diversity' (where diversity refers to the specialization and division of education provision). As demonstrated in this paper, schools incorporate recognizable dominant discourses into their promotional material in order to frame how they wish to be perceived and compared as specialist education providers. On this account, it is important to acknowledge the partial view implicit to my analysis of the promotional material presented in this paper and its communicative aims. The impossibility of an unmediated access to truth (Zizek, 2009) suggests that there is no one vantage point from which truth can be realized and understood, but instead truth has to be accepted as something which is culturally mediated and historically constructed or locally produced. This has implications for any discourse analysis, especially one that sets itself the task of conceptualizing and explaining the discourses implicit to the visual design of school brochures and websites. This is because school brochures and websites contribute to the visual saturation of schools as objects of consumption and therefore can be understood to operate through the same abstract logic which characterizes consumable goods on the market-place (Symes, 1998). The suggestion here is that meanings are, figuratively speaking, up for grabs; their significations – what is conveyed to the viewer in terms of meaning – are context-dependent and bound to cultural inflection; and their implications for parents' school choice unpredictable and uncertain. Further analysis around the homology or correspondence between parents' aspirations and tastes and the kinds of symbolic fictions and fantasies identified in this paper is therefore desirable.

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