SCHOOLS, SCHOOLING AND ELITE STATUS IN ENGLISH EDUCATION – CHANGING CONFIGURATIONS?

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RÉSUMÉ. – À partir des données d'une étude longitudinale portant sur quatre écoles privées d'une zone géographique d'Angleterre, cet article cherche à comprendre comment distinctement ces écoles cherchent à se placer comme 'élitistes'. La recherche met en évidence l'héritage continu des Grandes Écoles (pensionnats) des XVIIIe et XIXe siècles dans la formation de pratiques contemporaines et modernes. Un accent mis sur l'excellence universitaire et le développement de la personne dans son entier pourrait être trouvé pour chacune des écoles étudiées. Cependant, le marché de plus en plus concurrentiel de l'enseignement veut que ces différentes écoles doivent re-interpréter activement les marqueurs élitaires pour s'engager plus directement avec les fractions des groupes sociaux qu'ils voient comme comprenant le noyau principal de leur recrutement de base.

MOTS CLÉS. – Angleterre ; Commercialisation ; Écoles privées ; Éducation de l'élite ; Enseignement de l'élite.

ABSTRACT – Drawing on findings from a longitudinal study of four private schools in one geographical area in England, this paper seeks to extend understandings of how these schools differentially seek to position themselves as 'elite'. Findings highlight the continuing legacy of the Great Schools (private boarding-schools) of 18th and 19th century England in shaping contemporary and modern-day practices. An emphasis on academic excellence and the development of the whole person could be found in each of the schools studied. However, the increasingly competitive (global) education market means that individual schools must actively re-interpret these elite markers to engage more directly with the social group fractions they see as comprising their core recruitment constituencies.

KEYWORDS. – Elite Education; Elite Studies; England; Marketisation; Private Schooling.

There is a growing field of academic study concerned with elite forms of education – building in significant ways on the earlier contributions made by Walford (1986) and Delamont (1989) in the UK, Connell *et al.* (1981) in Australia, Cookson and Persell (1985) and Proweller (1998) in the USA, and Bourdieu (1996) in France. Recent research has extended the ethnographic tradition established in earlier work but has broadened the geographic and subject focus to include studies conducted in Germany, Argentina, Singapore, South Africa and other countries, and to look more specifically at questions of gender, family involvement, links to higher education, and future elite trajectories.

At the same time, the broader field of 'elite studies' has also experienced somewhat of a resurgence (as called for by Savage and Williams, 2008), with scholars mapping the trajectories of elite actors, and examining the social spaces they occupy, as well as their

enmeshment within particular networks. However, there remain fundamental challenges for elite studies and more specifically for elite education – namely concerning definitions of 'elite' and to what extent notions of 'eliteness' are contextually located (Maxwell, 2015).

In this paper, we consider this question in relation to the forms of schooling offered by part of the private education sector in England and examine the ways in which institutions draw on a variety of markers to position themselves as 'elite'. We review some of the definitions offered to date and, drawing on findings from a three-year study of privately-educated young women in one area of the country, offer some suggestions for how best to understand schooling and 'eliteness' within this particular context.

The English context

The education market in England today, as in many other countries, is characterised a strongly differentiated educational landscape. There is a small fee-paying sector (representing around seven per cent of the market), which has in place its own systems for recruitment and accountability. The rest of the education sector is publicly funded, although since the 1980s, policy 'innovations' have attempted to increase the proportion of schools operating relatively independently outside local government control. These same forces have made it possible for private organisations to run individual or chains of schools (Ball, 2013). The higher education sector is still largely funded and overseen by the state. Our focus in this paper is on the fee-paying or private secondary schooling sector.

Historically at least, elite education in England has been associated with the private sector, and with the provision of boarding school education in which students live at school for long periods of time. In the past, the term elite education was synonymous with the education provided to the children of elite members of society, as well as those institutions that undertook to educate future members of the elite (Ball, 2015), given both the classed and fee-paying nature of English education. In this paper we seek to examine how such an understanding of elite education has changed in the 21st century, and also how gendered such definitions may be. We are also interested in the processes by which elite schools seek to differentiate themselves from competitors within a changing market.

What is an elite school – understandings from the literature

In the US context, Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b) offers a definition of what it means to be an *elite* boarding-school. He proposes that such schools can be differentiated from other institutions typologically (they are 'independent schools'), scholastically (an extensive curricula is offered), historically (they have provided education for particular social groups over time), geographically (by being located in a particular part of the city or countryside, with impressive grounds and facilities and/or iconic architecture), and demographically (in terms of the social groups who attend the school).

The framework he offers is a useful one and, reflecting on many of the schools discussed in recent work by McCarthy and Kenway (2014) and colleagues, Allan and Charles (2014), Maxwell and Aggleton (2013; 2014b), Sandgren (2014), Forbes and Weiner (2008), these criteria capture many of the defining features others have observed. Gaztambide-Fernández (2009b) acknowledges, however, that whether and how a particular school is characterised in terms of one or more of these dimensions are often matters for debate. It was the subjective

nature of these judgements and the variability with which individual schools satisfy these five dimensions that motivated us to explore this issue further.

Kenway *et al*. (2013) stress the importance of criteria such as the longevity and history of the school in defining its status as elite. They highlight the importance of a school having an impressive academic record for end of school examination results and a high proportion of students gaining entry into 'prestigious' universities. A list of alumni occupying key positions in public life, and strong connectivity between a school and its alumni (see also Maxwell, Aggleton, 2013) are also indicators of elite status, alongside markers of wealth in terms of the school's facilities and/or the fees charged. Kenway and colleagues suggest that 'elite schooling always involves exclusivity on grounds of wealth or merit and claims of superiority of some sort' (p. 18). Gaztambide-Fernández *et al*. (2013) add an important dimension to this definition: namely, that claiming or bestowing the title *elite* must be performed by a social actor or institution with the power to determine and confer such status.

Howard's (2008) work draws attention to diversity among elite schools, going so far as to suggest that the four schools participating in his research were 'as different as they are similar' (p. 216). The schools, all located in one part of the USA, held quite different political philosophies (from conservative to liberal), were attended by pupils from very different social backgrounds (some characterised by 'old money' while others were dominated by members of the *nouveaux riches*) and maintained varied relationships with the local communities in which they were situated (detached or more connected). Regardless of type, Howard found that the schools took 'great pride in their distinctive qualities' (2008, p. 216), and that there were shared values in each of them: in the form of concern for academic excellence, ambition, trust, service and tradition.

These important contributions offer a number of suggestions about how we might decide whether a particular school is elite, but they also suggest that markers of eliteness are strongly influenced by the context in which an institution is located. Thus, Weis and Cipollone (2013) acknowledge that the elite schools they researched in a 'tier-two' city in the northeast of the USA differed in certain respects to a similar school located in a more globally-oriented, tier-one city, such as New York. Meanwhile, the US East Coast boarding-schools documented by Gaztambide-Fernández (2009a) and Khan (2011), are in many ways unique to that part of the country – long serving the needs of social groups locally, such as the Boston Brahmins and other East coast, mainly white, wealthy families. In contrast, work by Koh and Kenway (2012) in Singapore and by van Zanten and Maxwell (2015) in France, suggests that certain other elite institutions may operate at a national level of recognition and therefore need to be seen as part of a grander field of schooling.

Consideration of these issues can be advanced by drawing on conceptual as well as empirical research. Theoretically, we might think of elites as those who determine the 'value of, and distribution of resources' (Khan, 2012, p. 362) within a particular space. The kinds of resources that are valued and the ways these can be drawn upon to exert power are socially and historically determined, in no little part shaped by elite members themselves. Put more strongly, as Kenway and Koh (2013) argue, elite schools are 'involved in acts of consecration' (p. 10) – producing the next generation of elite members, and thereby influencing who becomes a member of an elite and who does not.

However, maintaining the position of those schools that are understood as elite requires active work, and can be precarious. In order to stay elite, schools must engage with local, national and increasingly, global market dynamics. This can be achieved by commodifying

particular markers, values, and practices (Windle, Stratton, 2013) which seek to create a particular and quite specific kind of educational package whose integrity acts to entice the groups of consumers being targeted (Ball, 2003). The positioning and marketing practices which schools must now engage in are worth examining more closely if we are to understand how notions of 'eliteness' are being re-worked in the current moment (Rizvi, 2014).

Against this background, and in this paper, we examine how the notion of elite education has been constructed historically in England, and how the legacy of this is shaping aspects of the current education market. Through a focus on some of the ways in which four private schools in one part of England describe and position themselves within the contemporary marketplace, we will seek to make a number of preliminary suggestions concerning how certain private schools in England nowadays seek to construct themselves as 'elite'. Our focus here, somewhat uniquely, is on a sub-set of schools providing for girls' and young women's education, a much under-researched part of the elite education market, in England at least.

The study
Our research study focused on four fee-paying schools located in one geographical area in southern England – comprising a major city, several smaller towns and a large rural area. Schools were chosen to represent key types of private schools in England – two were boarding-schools (one co-educational and one girls-only; named for the purposes of our study as St. Thomas' and Rushby respectively) and two were day-schools (again, one co-educational and one single-sex/girls-only – named Brownstone and Osler[1]). Careful choice ensured that one of the schools (Osler) was also highly academically selective.

The primary focus of our study was to examine the ways in which young women who are being privately educated understand their social location and the discursive and affective resources they draw on when describing their current practices and imagine their futures. For this reason, none of our schools were boys-only institutions. Alongside interviews with 91 young women (which took place between 2010 and 2013), and days spent immersed in the everyday life of each school – observing lessons and life in the boarding-houses – we interviewed four members of the senior leadership teams in each institution.

Interviews set out to explore how staff understood the culture of their particular school, whether they believed the school had changed over time, what other schools they competed with, and the ways in which young people were supported to develop confidence. It is data drawn from these 16 staff interviews that form the main focus of this paper.

Following interview transcription, a process of thematic analysis took place. Each transcript was read and annotated with a focus on the ways staff described their school and how it differed from others. Key sections of the interview narratives detailing these responses were developed into a summary highlighting the school's unique selling points, its competitor institutions, why families might chose this school over another, and so forth. From these summaries we were able to identify a range of markers drawn upon when seeking to describe each school and the manner in which it differentiated itself from others. We then turned our

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[1] Brownstone provides education for students from Years 1-13 (ages 5-18 years), Osler from Years 5-13 (ages 10-18) and St. Thomas and Rushby provides for Years 9-13 (when students are aged between 14-18 years).

attention to observational data and analysis of young women's comments in interviews[2] to extend the descriptions of each school we developed.

In the analysis that follows below, we focus on the way in which each school sought control over the value of and distribution of resources that were potentially connotative of elite status. We do this in two stages. Firstly, we examine how schools positioned themselves in relation to the dominant historical construction of an English elite education (seeking to understand some of the differences between elite forms of education for girls and boys). Secondly, we consider how the increasingly competitive education market in England is causing elite markers of distinction to be re-worked in the present day.

The place of the Great Schools in the English education imaginary
Central to any study of elite education in England must be the historical legacy of the 'Great Schools' and the influence this has had on the construction of what an elite education means today (see Maxwell, Aggleton, 2015b).

Education in England before the twentieth century was largely provided by the Church and a few private benefactors (Ringer, 1979). Over the course of the 18th and 19th centuries, however, a small group of schools (also known as 'public schools'), began to be monopolised by the aristocracy and increasingly by the newly-wealthy industrialists (Walford, 2005). Nine of these schools were consecrated 'Great Schools'[3] by a government-initiated commission – The Clarendon Commission (1861-1864) – and considered to be the 'chief nurseries of our statesmen' (Walford, 2012, p. 21). Such institutions prepared young men to take up future positions of power across English society.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, access to university was only possible for young men who attended one of these Great Schools, or the second wave of boarding-schools established after a further government-initiated commission on education – the Taunton Commission (1864-1868) – as students needed to have followed a particular type of curriculum based on the classics (Latin and Greek, Ancient History) as well as a focus on mathematics, a modern language, two natural sciences, history, geography, drawing, and music. Thus, the history of education in England is one in which a small group of schools became positioned as 'defining institutions' (Steedman, 1987) – offering a strongly education, alongside extra-curricular activities, which aimed to develop Christian gentlemen of strong moral character (Honey, 1977; McCulloch, 1991), who would go on to elite universities, and take up positions of leadership both in England and across the British Empire. Since their establishment, most elite boys' schools have been outside state-control.

The history of elite girls' education is somewhat different. Until the nineteenth century, most middle and upper class girls were educated at home. The main driver for public education came from a group of female educator pioneers who campaigned for, and established a number of day-schools (most notable were those in London and Manchester). A second driver for the expansion of schooling possibilities for upper-middle class and aristocratic young women came when a girls' equivalent to some newly established boys' boarding-schools were demanded, also during the mid- to late-nineteenth century (for instance the

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[2] See Maxwell and Aggleton (2013, 2014a, 2014b, 2015)
[3] The nine Great Schools identified were: Eton, Charterhouse, Harrow, Rugby, Shrewsbury, Westminster, Winchester, St Paul's and Merchant Taylors'.

establishment of Cheltenham Ladies' College in 1854, which following the founding of Cheltenham College in 1841). These boarding-schools 'continued the emphasis … upon being exclusive, elite institutions for the daughters of gentlemen thereby differentiating themselves from the more socially heterogeneous [day] high schools' (Purvis, 1991, p. 87).

The education of elite and upper middle class girls, unlike that for boys – which was focused on academic study and access to university – has, for much of its history, exhibited something of a tension over what the appropriate outcome of such an education should be: to become accomplished 'ladies of leisure' (Walford, 2005, p. 85) and intellectual partners to their husbands yet able to run a household; or to be educated for the purposes of taking up positions of employment (Delamont, 1978). Many schools, especially those run by women headteachers with strong emancipatory aims, have had to straddle this tension – seeking to provide an academically rigorous education while taking heed of the concerns of many of their fee-paying families (on whom these new schools largely relied for their financial viability) to ensure such an education would not threaten their daughter's marriage prospects (Delamont, 1978). Purvis (1991) has argued that this dilemma of 'double conformity' continued to shape the construction of elite education for girls into the 1970s and 1980s.

Thus, the charters for boys' and girls' elite education institutions have historically been different. The value and social position conferred through attending these educational establishments has likewise varied according to gender (Meyer, 1970). Young men, especially those from non-aristocratic backgrounds but whose fathers were members of the newly-wealthy industrialist sector of society, were able to 'learn' the manners and values associated with being Christian gentlemen, in preparation for positions of leadership within England and across the Empire. For young women, however, there was a division between provision for those from aristocratic backgrounds, who attended elite boarding schools and combined a more academic education with a focus on cultivation, and provision for middle class young women, who tended to attend day schools in which teachers were concerned to educate girls not only to be good marriage partners, but also also to be able to attend university and take up employment if needs be.

Despite differences in the ways boys' and girls' elite schools developed, the historical legacy of the Great Schools with its emphasis on academic excellence and moral standards remains a defining feature of an English education. Despite several challenges to the autonomy of the private/independent sector in English schooling throughout the twentieth century (McCulloch, 2004), there has been, and continues to be, strong state support for an independent education sector (Walford, 2005).

School Positioning in relation to the imaginary of the English public school
We turn now to consider some of the ways in which different schools in our study sought to present themselves as 'elite'. Our first finding emphasises how strong the hold of the Great School imaginary still is on the way in which the private schools involved understood themselves and sought to differentiate themselves from others.

St. Thomas (a co-educational boarding-school) was founded in the mid-nineteenth century. Despite its placement somewhat towards the lower end of the hierarchy of elite educational institutions nationally, the school still saw itself as part of the network of Great Schools. As one of its housemasters explained: 'there's a really important distinction between a school

like this which would consider itself to be a sort of public school and many other independent [fee-paying/private] schools'. He continued:

> – X school for instance in X [locality] is in no sense a public school at all; it's an independent school which is highly academic, which is focussed primarily on education, where the fees are you know much, much lower than the fees in a school like this, where the clientele is predominantly local. I mean, you know people won't come from very far away, whereas you know we get people from all over the place, which is again typical of a public school. … You know, other independent schools like X kind of school would be far more kind of earnest if you like. … Public schools were founded in the 19th century, and they were founded basically, you know, with some religious purpose in mind … [St. Thomas'] sees itself as being a place to educate you know, the 'whole person' as it were. So in other words although we'd always say that the academic was the most important element in that, and the thing that sort of really you know matters when [the pupils] leave … or at least that they should have done well in that sphere … there are all sorts of other ways that you can do well here, and everybody's expected to try and do well in, you know, a range of things.

The suggestion here is that there is an important differentiation within the private education sector, between being a 'public school' (the term initially used to describe schools such as Winchester and Eton who developed the model of the Great School in the 14th century) and an 'independent' school, which while also fee-paying does not have the same historical legacy. While the other school the housemaster is referring regularly tops the national league tables[4] for schools in terms of the proportion of students getting the highest qualifications possible within the English system (three A-star grades, the highest possible mark) for their final Year 13 exams), the participant seems to be suggesting that his public school has more status (because of its historical legacy), has a broader reach (because students come from further afield), and therefore plays a slightly different function – producing well-rounded individuals, which the housemaster argues is more important than a focus on academic achievement alone.

One of the deputy headteachers at Rushby, a girls-only boarding-school, established in the mid-nineteenth century at about the same time as some of the other well-known girls' boarding-schools, likewise emphasised this focus on 'the whole person' and the extras public school education could offer:

> – I mean obviously we understand about results. You know, the girls need to get great results in the highly competitive world we live in. But actually what gives them the edge over somebody else, is everything else that they can do and the opportunities that are available to them, which in a boarding-school ... you know … because you're here that much longer, the opportunities are there.

Senior staff respondents in both boarding-schools emphasised how they taught 'manners and respect' (Deputy Head, Rushby), thereby seeking to ensure their pupils were 'polite and civilised' or 'polished, but not pretentious', as expressed by two housemasters at St. Thomas. Both this concern for the 'whole person' and for manners link back to the focus the Great Schools had on preserving a particular kind of English culture, stressing the training of students to become Christian gentlemen or ladies (Allan, Charles, 2014). In both of these boarding-schools, but not in the two day-schools we studied, chapel attendance was an important occasion, with the greatest emphasis given to it at Rushby, the all-girls' school.

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[4] Official league tables rating the academic performance of all schools in England are not produced. Some league tables are constructed by newspapers or interested bodies, but not all private schools release their data, so these ranking schemes are never comprehensive.

The development of personal qualities was aided by the house system at St. Thomas and driven by the senior leadership team (which included the chaplain) at Rushby. The 'housemaster' is a central figure in boys' public schooling (Walford, 1986).

> – Again, that's an element of a sort of … you know a public school, and the grander the public school the more freedom you'll have, and the more independence boarding-houses have … and you can chart it. You know, so if you go to Winchester or something, or Eton, those schools - basically their housemasters - manage almost entirely their own admissions.

At St. Thomas, housemasters were responsible for talking to prospective families and played an important role in determining who was offered a place. Both housemasters interviewed at this school emphasised the role they saw for themselves in supporting the development of boys. 'As a housemaster here I'm trying to … take these bunch of boys, you know with their strengths and weaknesses and whatever, and to find their little path through' one of them explained. He continued:

> – We've got this five pillars culture, and I've got ... all around the boarding-house … I've got these posters up with the, just the five pillars. And I've even tried to promote it by having … I've had some little house pens made, and I give every pupil a house pen which has got our five pillars on it … we chose trust, respect, community, pride and endeavour. So in terms of establishing our culture that's what I'm trying to do. So whenever someone, you know, has been intolerant because they've taken someone's crisps, you know we can point out well look you know we're in a community that doesn't work with intolerance ... so there's community and there's respect for other people's property and there's trust ... so we just try and keep it that way. And the pride and endeavour is linked up. You know pride … just take pride in your work and take part in whatever you do, and endeavour just is an effort really.

Thus, these two public schools/more traditional boarding schools emphasise their connections to the past through a narrative which commodifies markers – such as offering boarding, a focus on the development of the 'whole' person, and the promotion of Christian values – as elements of difference or distinction. The fact that elite families chose to educate their sons and daughters in schools such as these historically, continues to confer elite status on schools modelled on this idea today. Thus, the Great Schools have remained 'defining institutions' (Steedman, 1987) up until the present. Furthermore, the image of the Great School also shapes how other fee-paying schools, which cannot lay claim to the legacy of long serving the needs of the upper classes by providing education trajectories that lead to university entrance and the professions, construct a narrative of themselves as institutions with similar characteristics .

Our co-educational day-school – Brownstone – was not a traditional public school in the way that St. Thomas and Rushby were. Brownstone had been founded in the mid-20th century, and did not have the historical or religious legacy of other public schools. However, it too sought to to emulate some of the qualities associated with the Great Schools. It was a member of Headmasters and Headmistresses Conference (HMC – the body that sees itself as representing the leading fee-paying day – and boarding-schools across the UK and beyond), it had a very long school day (from 8.30 to 17.00), it provided a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities, and it ran a house system. The Director of Studies at Brownstone explained that 'each housemaster is free to organise things as they will' and that pupils stayed in the same house 'through their school career'. Most significantly, through success on the playing field the school sought to establish a name for itself within the 'public school network'. The Director of Studies explained how the boys' rugby team had gone from strength to strength: while a few years back Brownstone's first team would play against a very well-known traditional public school's third team, they now played its first team. Pride of such

achievement was almost palpable in the Director of Studies' description of this recent change[5].

Yet, Brownstone's claim to the title of 'public school' was directly challenged by a senior member of staff at nearby St. Thomas, when he discussed the local education market. The respondent at St. Thomas suggested that Brownstone's Headteacher appeared 'to have ambitions of grandeur', and that he should remember that the school had initially been founded as an institution for children in need of learning support. He explained that while Brownstone's 'unsophisticated lads' may recently have beaten St. Thomas at rugby: they 'played much dirtier', with St. Thomas own boys being much 'less from the street'. Such dismissive statements about the clientele of Brownstone illustrate the ways in which elite schools seek to promote a broad curriculum with a focus on appropriate manner and values, so as to differentiate themselves from other schools who might be 'pretenders' in the elite education market (van Zanten, 2015).

Osler (the single-sex day-school in our sample), on the other hand, did not see itself as a public school, but as an independent school. Over the last decade, it had emerged from the shadows after achieving very high academic results for its pupils in end of school exams, and winning a national award for being one of the best independent schools in England. Under the stewardship of two seemingly formidable headteachers, according to the senior staff interviewed, its reputation had grown and grown. Recently, the school had decided to extend its extra-curricular provision. A member of the senior leadership team explained:

> − For these girls who are, you know, aspirational, [from] high aspirational families, [there is] quite a lot of pressure potentially … you know pressure from all sorts of reasons, school or not … potentially [only] following … one single track; that actually as a school, one of the things we could uniquely bring was an ability for them to create possibility and perhaps try and make them … try as many different things as they possibly could, and create an environment where they felt safe and able to do that, and also we felt you know as young women as well who you know sometimes … [feel] they have to get it 100% right … so creating an environment in a school where you genuinely could create possibilities, say it's all right to just have a go and you may not be the best of this and that's fine actually … and get it wrong, and that's all right, and that's as much of a learning experience as getting it right, and you'll learn.

This change in emphasis may be read as a desire to compete with other leading elite schools, both in terms of academic outcomes but also through a stronger focus on 'the whole person'. At the same time, the concern to ensure that young women were comfortable taking risks may be seen as linked to the perceived demands of a global employment market, in which a range of 'soft skills' (Brown *et al.*, 2011) is required in order to succeed.

The above quotation reminds us of the hold of 'double conformity' in elite education for girls (Delamont, 1978). While many girls' schools compete unashamedly on academic results and in facilitating young women's access to elite universities, Osler's concern to promote an environment that makes it all right for girls not always to aim to be the best may also be read as an attempt to shore up long-standing beliefs in women's intellectual fragility, and the split between male rationality and female emotionality (Clegg, 2013). Kenway *et al.* (2015) also

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[5] The importance of sporting achievements as a distinctive and distinguishing feature within public schools has also been noted by Horne *et al.* (2011) and previously by Honey (1977).

noted concerns around emotional and mental well-being for the students in their academic, elite girls' school.

The deputy headteacher at Rushby directly engaged in discussion about this dilemma of double conformity. On the one hand, she explained, the senior leadership team (comprised entirely of women, except for a male chaplain) was focused on producing highly academic and ambitious young women, with an emphasis too on accomplishments in extra-curricular areas such as music, drama and sport (Maxwell, Aggleton, 2013; 2014b). However, senior staff were aware that the vast majority of their students came from families where mothers were 'ladies that lunch' and that some of their pupils would take on a similar role in the future. Navigating the emancipatory desire expressed by the school's senior leadership team without directly challenging the ambitions that dominant social groups may have for their daughters, is a dilemma similar to that faced by the pioneering headteachers of the newly-established girls' schools in the mid-nineteenth century. It can be tricky to balance an academic education with families' desire to ensure their daughters are appropriately feminine with good marriage prospects.

Overall, two schools in our sample – St Thomas and Rushby – lay claim to being 'elite' by virtue of their historical legacy, having been established during the second wave of establishment of new boys' and girls' boarding-schools in the mid-nineteenth century (Maxwell, Aggleton, 2015b). While St. Thomas' could boast of a significant number of well-known alumni, Rushby had educated generations of women from the landed gentry or aristocrats. Both schools claimed to provide a rigorous academic education, but continued to promote their extra-curricular provision to support the development of 'whole' young men and women with the disposition to uphold the Great Schools' thoroughly English tradition (McCulloch, 1991).

In contrast, Osler and Brownstone, two day-schools, were less able to position themselves within the tradition of the Great Schools. Firstly, they did not have social and historical markers to draw on. Osler, a single-sex girls' school, positioned itself as focused on academic success, preparing young women for the global world of employment. However, success in study should not be to the detriment of emotional well-being, and so a wider curriculum had been more introduced, seeking to develop the resilience of the school's young women and broadening the kinds of employment trajectories possible – beyond the respectable professions of law and medicine, to encompass future careers in teaching, drama and the arts. In this way, Osler sought partially to engage with the discourse of the Great School and its emphasis on the whole person, but within the legacy of wider struggles to develop a more encompassing, academic girls' education (Purvis, 1991).

Brownstone, as a co-educational day-school, wished to promote itself as a private school alternative both to existing boarding-schools in the region and the single-sex, highly academic day-schools locally. To do so, it was working hard to raise its academic profile, but was also investing heavily in (mainly boys') sport, seeking to offer a strong extra-curricular focus in music, art and drama – so that here too, the whole person was being educated, although without explicit reference to the strongly Christian ethos that characterised practices in the other two (public) boarding-schools in our sample.

in an educational market - new differentiations between schools

We have argued elsewhere that market logics have long shaped the private and elite education sector in England (Maxwell, Aggleton, 2015b), but the current context is moving towards a highly competitive, mixed economy of education, in which commodification, differentiation and niche-positioning strategies are becoming more evident (Ball, 2003; Weenink, 2009; McDonald *et al.*, 2012). At the same time, research is beginning to show how the globalised and financialised nature of the economy (Savage, Williams, 2008; Khan, 2015) is leading to a re-configuration of the social structure in England and an increasing number of fractions within it (Savage *et al.*, 2013; Savage, 2014). These two changes are affecting the composition of the education market, as educational attainment in terms of credentials accumulated (level of university degree secured) and type of educational institution attended take on greater significance in ensuring elite group membership (Wakeling, Savage, 2015).

This in turn is having a direct impact on 'institutional charters' (Meyer, 1970) and therefore the practices that elite schools develop. There is an increasing expectation from parents/customers that a highly academic education will be made available, and yet, as the number of elite fractions increases and the identity of who the elites are becomes more nebulous (covering a range of occupational fields and other markers that are linked to being 'elite'), schools face a double bind – ensuring enough families want to buy their educational product while also offering a relatively homogeneous space for 'people like us', as elite groups engage in purposes of social closure (Parkin, 1974; Ball, 2003; van Zanten, Maxwell, 2015).

While in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, many elite schools had been keen to cater to 'a relatively static social clientele' as they did not wish to 'dilute [the schools'] aristocratic nature' (Walford, 2005, p. 79), current day competition over students means many schools have to weigh up the benefits of recruiting a relatively homogeneous cohort, which some parents may prefer or even expect, with the need to diversify a school's investment.

> – I mean I can remember when I ... started as a housemaster, I had a house full of ... it was a co-ed house in those days ... it was full of boys and girls from ... a lot of civil servants, a lot of military personnel and all the rest of it ... and that has all gone. And I think ... 'cos a modern day civil servant will not earn enough money. (Deputy Headteacher, St. Thomas).

Diversification of the local and regional customer base has become necessary given changes to the economy, as highlighted by the Deputy Headteacher above. Increasingly, the international market is assuming importance (as it is in the higher education sector). Student migration to England and other Anglophone countries has been well documented (Brooks, Waters, 2011; Kenway, Fahey, 2014), as families seek out the education credentials which they believe their children need to access the global elite trajectories so carefully analysed by Brown, Lauder and Ashton (2011). Thus, St. Thomas, for example, works hard to recruit students from East Asia, as well as Europe; the latter coming to the school to study for the International Baccalaureate. But diversifying one's portfolio, carries risks as well (Maxwell, Aggleton, 2015a). Many English parents and overseas families seek to send their children to 'a predominantly white school, and that's what parents want to buy' (senior member of staff, Rushby).

Our analysis of the ways the four schools in our study sought to position themselves within the current education market identified other features drawn upon in constructing themselves not only as elite, but also as schools that potential parents might find enticing. Location, for instance, was seen an important distinguishing feature for the schools in our study. Unlike

Gaztambide-Fernández's (2009b) observation that US elite boarding schools were partly viewed as high status because of their rural locations, St. Thomas sought to sell itself by the fact that it was an *urban* boarding-school, whereas many of its co-educational boarding-school competitors were rurally located. Crucially, however, the school was able to offer similar-sized grounds to its rural competitors as well as the facilities an urban area had to offer, such as the added bonus of pupils being able to wander round the corner to visit the local shop and access to local university sports facilities. The deputy headteacher explained, 'I mean if the parent is a London-based parent, then they love the fact that it is a city school, but it's a *toned down* city'. Similarly Rushby, a much smaller, more rurally isolated school was chosen by parents either because it either mirrored the areas they themselves lived in, or because it removed daughters from the dangers of growing up in a large city.

Meanwhile, for day-schools, location influenced the catchment areas in which they could compete for students. While there were a number of independent schools in the part of the country our study focused on, both Osler and Brownstone were located outside the main urban centre, which meant that some families living near these schools might see them as the best option; however, their location was also perceived as a disadvantage due to the absence of public transport links to them. Partly to counteract this perception, both schools ran local bus services. Offering a tailor-made bus service of this kind was intended to prompt some families to choose their school over another.

A further important concern most schools had to grapple with was that of optimal size. Recent decades have seen many smaller private schools in England close their doors, merge with other schools, or become co-educational in order to survive (Walford, 2005). According to the deputy headteacher at Rushby, a smaller school meant that staff could get to know all the students and provided a stronger system of care and support. Yet the limitation of being a relatively small school was that it could not boast the same kinds of facilities as some of its competitors:

> – When it comes to things like facilities, frankly I don't think we can compete with some of the bigger schools ... 'cos they have more income, they therefore can have more things. So if you want that flash big ... you know if you look at X [school], it's phenomenally impressive when you walk up. They have just built something like a £5 million equestrian centre.

Meanwhile, St. Thomas, was expanding – partly driven by a desire to improve its overall academic profile but also the wish to populate its first sports teams from a larger pool of potential athletes. One of the housemasters explained,

> – In just the last year or two we've had a bit of a blip … we've taken a hit there. You know our sport … the parental chat and everything is about the sports results and … the morale of the staff and the pupils is quite closely linked to sport, more than music and drama because it's more there every Saturday afternoon and the parents see it and the results are on the website. … The reputation that we weren't so good at sport has a snowball effect, and therefore people go to X or Y [schools] instead.

However, according to the deputy headteacher, size should not preclude a focus on pastoral care. He described the supportive environment St. Thomas was able to offer as the school's 'jewel in the crown' – a claim he specifically emphasised during Open Days for prospective families, drawing on his considerable experience as an independent schools inspector. This, as one of the housemasters interviewed explained, was different to what was provided by some of the more traditional boys-only public school where a 'harsher environment' still prevailed. All four schools in our study emphasised the importance given to developing a

caring and safe environment for their students, arguably an essential marker of private schools today, but also potentially a change from the kind of reputation many elite boys' schools had had in the past (Walford, 1986).

The analysis offered here strongly suggests that additional markers and strategies for differentiation are becoming necessary in today's education market. Not only are private schools seeking to provide an educational package that draws on the legacy of the Great Schools, other criteria such as location, size, facilities and the kind of environment offered, are increasingly critical markers. Underpinning this is the need to balance diversification of the school's client portfolio with the desire for niche-based homogeneity (Maxwell, Aggleton, 2015a). Thus, elite schools not only seek to distinguish themselves from 'imposters' in the market, but also they need carefully to identify themselves as catering for one or more elite group fractions (carefully managed through a processes of marketing), at the same time considering how doing so affects their ability to lay claim to elite status.

Concluding thoughts

This paper set out to extend limited discussions concerning how best to define and understand what might be understood as 'elite' schools. By drawing both on the literature and on findings from a recent study of four rather different private schools in England, we have been able to show how different schools articulate their educational offer and seek to develop a niche for themselves in an increasingly competitive marketplace.

Our findings suggest that the claims schools can make about their historical legacy, together with a commitment to the provision of an academic education alongside a focus on the 'whole person', are key ways in which institutions position themselves as elite within the education market. These are markers, we argue, that stem from the construction of an elite education developed during the nineteenth century, but which persist in modified form to the present day.

Crucially, however, in an increasingly marketised environment, where the purchasers of elite education are more varied due to transformations in the economic structure of English society, and where some schools look towards the international market for students as well, the 'new but old' educational product offered has to be carefully packaged (McDonald *et al*., 2012). Schools need to consider the desires of their potential customers and differentiate themselves from their competitors. Such processes of active positioning and differentiation are achieved, in part, within the shadow of the Great Schools and their impact in defining what elite education is. However, traditional markers of elite status are being revised to some extent by modern-day demands – such as young women wish to compete with young men for elite university admission and the need for schools to prepare their students to become good global citizens (Kenway, Fahey, 2014). Thus, in the present study St. Thomas' school, for example, had introduced the International Baccalaureate as a way of drawing in an international cohort of clients, while also offering a sought-after academic credential not available at other local coeducational schools at the time. Meanwhile, Osler, a school traditionally unable to lay claim to the legacy of being a Great School, had, by employing a marketing executive, re-branded itself to compete more distinctly with other high status girls' boarding schools locally and regionally.

We argued earlier that historically the remit of girls' and boys' elite school education in England has been strongly gendered. For boys, elite education institutions became spaces in which members of the traditional elite (in England this equates to aristocratic families) were

increasingly educated alongside the sons of wealthy industrialists, with both groups of young men benefitting from both an academic and moral education. However, the education of young women remained divided between aristocratic families who tended to choose a boarding school education, while middle-class families and those from lower socio-economic strata tended to take up the more academic and employment-oriented education to be found in the newly-established day schools. While some writers on girls' education in England have suggested that this tension has remained, plagued by the pressures of 'double conformity', we suggest, based on our data, that a highly academic education for girls, aimed at prestigious university entrance (prestigious in both the academic and social sense) is now foregrounded both in single-sex and co-educational institutions, and in day- or boarding schools.

As Rizvi (2014) in his analysis of Ripon College (a pseudonym for an elite school in India) argues, elite schools internationally must find ways to 'strategically re-position … [themselves] within the emerging global market' (p. 290). However, not only do such schools operate in a changing global space, but also they must locate themselves within national, regional and local education markets. A number of factors therefore come together to shape the difficult process of 'identity construction' whereby schools must find a way to legitimately lay claim to being distinct and navigate the challenging contours of what an elite education means for young men and women, while ensuring they recruit enough students to remain financially viable. This requires schools to be informed by what consumers desire, but also actively shaped by what it is that families think they want from an education. Our paper makes a contribution to such innovative discussion by exploring how some of the markers traditionally associated with an English elite education are being extended and re-imagined in a more competitive and precarious education marketplace.

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