

Choosing International: A Case Study of Globally Mobile Parents

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Everyday choices made by people “reflect and reproduce societal power divisions of economic and cultural capital” (Johnston and Baumann 2010: 128). Johnston and Baumann write about elite food preparation and consumption, and we venture to say that the everyday parental practices around school choice are also distinct markers of social class and social identity that reflect both the social history of an individual family as well

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as their future aspirations. Paralleling the discourses surrounding contemporary food culture which are normalising elite social status through the construction of so-called foodies as “middle-class elites” (Mapes 2015), we argue that similar effects are evident in moves to open up schools to practices that were formerly the preserve of elite schools in order that they can meet the expanding desires of middle-class families. Bilingual education is of particular interest here due to our focus on internationally mobile parents and the educational aspirations of middle-class German families. While social distinction is not often the overt desire of parents seeking such forms of educational practice, its attainment contributes to the production and re-production of middle-class elites.

Stephen Ball, along with his colleague Dimitra Nikita, recently challenged education scholars to recognise school choice as a global phenomenon, extending beyond local and national politics and policy-making (Ball and Nikita 2014: 81). They point to transnational school choice as a prerogative of a burgeoning global middle class who are simultaneously mobile and post-national in their orientation. In taking up this challenge, we focus mainly on the needs and concerns of a group of parents who either are about to move to Berlin or are already “in place” and offering advice to those intent on moving to this increasingly global city. The interchange we observe and analyse is an online forum on “International Schools in Berlin” (ISiB). Our contribution aims at broadening and deepening understanding of the ways in which the educational choices and strategies of globally mobile parents impact local social systems, particularly those pertaining to education. The chapter therefore makes a contribution around the ways in which “global cities and international schools are social sites in which new kinds of class identity are formed and reproduced” (Ball and Nikita 2014: 88).

The website hosting the thread we followed for the research reported below is Toytown Germany—the Berlin page specifically (<https://www.toytowngermany.com/berlin/>). The website requires individual contributors to register, and invites them to contribute personal information as part of their profile, including gender, age, nationality and current location. There is no information indicating qualifications, employment or income, which means judgement of socio-economic status is based on qualitative conjecture, analysing mostly the cultural values and positionings expressed throughout the thread. What is clear through the tone and tenor of the discourse in the thread is that we have not encountered any sort of “super elite” in this study; these are not the people who are in

control of the flows of global capital (Freeland 2011); instead, most, if not all, of the various contributions to the Toytown site offer insights into the habitus and capitals of the global middle classes. The nature of their inquiries in the ISiB thread, the needs they identify and the informal exchange offered give us confidence that we are investigating a discourse created among the global middle classes, described by Ball and Nikita (2014: 85) as the “managers and professionals and their families who move around the globe in the employ of multi-national corporations (MNCs) or as freelance experts” (Ball and Nikita 2014: 85).

In order to grapple with the complex, dynamic interchange between the global and the local, we draw on anthropologist Appadurai’s (1996) depiction of cultural globalisation as a highly variable flow of people, materials and ideas. Appadurai used the *scape* suffix to represent different forms of these flows of globalisation, identifying *ethnoscapes*, *financescapes* and *mediascapes*, thus offering metaphoric links to the uneven shaping of local terrains caused by the impacts of global modernisation. Tempering visions of globalisation as an overwhelmingly homogenising force, one needs also to imagine the push-back that happens from pre-existing structures—be they physical or ideational. Such an imaginary aids our comprehension of the irregular effects of globalisation. As Appadurai puts it, “Locality is itself a historical product and the histories through which localities emerge are eventually subject to the dynamics of the global” (Appadurai 1996: 18).

The notion of the “eduscape” was coined by Stronach (2010) to help conceptualise a globalised educational “market” characterised by international assessment and comparison as evidenced in the likes of the Third International Mathematical and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Stronach observed that, “the earlier coining of the notion of an ‘eduscape’ as a global discourse against and through which localities could identify themselves seems even more appropriate, since we now have evidence of how that self/other assessment is highly influential in leading to further educational policies and actions” (Stronach 2010: 34).

Extending Stronach’s ideas, we argue that an eduscape is a system, an apparatus characterised by an interconnected ensemble of institutions, architectural forms, regulatory negotiations, legislation, policies, as well as philosophical and moral discourse and positionings (Foucault 1980). The eduscape is profoundly influenced by the winds of ideas and policy and the driving channels of finance swirling around it. Often emanating from

centres of particular influence, these forces *reshape* rather than flatten the local. This means that at any given moment, the eduscape is distinctly local but at the same time these conditions of schooling are affected and produced by and through the global. For all of their similarities, the school systems of contemporary Berlin are different from those of London, Singapore, Frankfurt and so on. This helps explain why families moving to other jurisdictions for whatever reason have perplexing school choice decisions to make, regardless of their positions in social hierarchies. They do not understand how the apparatus works and have to learn “the system”.

“Choosing international” has a number of layers to it. Most obviously, in this context at least, globally mobile parents are taking decisions to relocate their families and to educate their children at some remove from their normal national system. International schools often facilitate globally mobile parents seeking to keep their families together whilst living abroad. The majority of these schools, up until relatively recently at least, have catered for expatriates seeking a particular national curriculum for their children. Some are specific in their national focus—British schools, or American, French, Japanese schools and so on—while others are more global in their orientation, catering for students from a broad range of nationalities and ideally offering a “distillation of the best content and the most effective instructional practices of each of the national systems” (Terwilliger 1972: 361). The aim of such schools is to offer students the ability to transfer smoothly between schools regardless of location and ultimately to be able attend university either at “home” or in other parts of the world (Hayden and Thompson 1995). There is a growing list of schools aimed at educating “young people to be at home in the world anywhere” (Leach 1969: 10). These types of international schools are much more global in their focus, and they are not under the control of any particular national groupings and target both local and international clientele (Cambridge and Thompson 2004; Hayden and Thompson 1995).

The International Baccalaureate is a notable development in the curriculum apparatus engaged by international schools. Aimed at providing an appropriate academic curriculum that simultaneously supports geographic and cultural mobility and the promotion of international understanding, while also offering competitive advantage for the more globally focused international schools seeking to attract international and domestic students (Bunnell 2008; Doherty 2009; Hayden and Wong 1997). As will become apparent, the Berlin eduscape contains examples of each of the

types of international school described above, all of which can be construed as contributing to greater and lesser degrees to the social production of an “elite middle-class” produced both locally and internationally. Our data allow us to join with migration scholars in challenging representations of globally mobile migrants as sojourners whose movement is characterised as short-term, “frictionless” and devoid of meaningful encounter or incorporation in the host society (Ryan and Mulholland 2013: 586).

Case studies on migrants reveal the crucial role children and their education play in decision-making on mobility (Forsey 2015; Ryan and Sales 2011). When families move due to employment opportunities pursued by at least one of the parents, all have to face a new environment that requires various forms of engagement with the host society at official levels as well as in the informal, everyday spheres of social life. Regardless of economic resource base, mobile families have to operate within the complex ideoscapes and social structures created around them, which is rarely straightforward or easy (Favell et al. 2006: 18; Forsey 2015: 780). In other words, the moves are not without friction. Taking one example—the problems evident in the case study pursued by Ryan and Sales (2011) on Polish immigrants in London alerts us to the frustrations and risks faced by parents as they weave their way through the needs and requirements of the local educational bureaucracy. Often the parents are not aware of national differences in the age of school enrolment or in the possibilities or necessities of school choice, uncertainties that are part of the migration experience. Naturally a parent does what she or he can to reduce the risks and frustrations of uncertainty created through migration, seeking information and advice offered by those who have gone before them. In contemporary society, websites targeting such exchanges of information are often accessed by those who are about to move.

As indicated, the data we refer to here emanates from an online discussion among parents who are *planning* to migrate with their children, and have enabled us to “observe” the processes and practices of decision-making *in situ*. We consider these practices to be part of an evolving global-local “eduscape”. The next section introduces our data. From there we will illustrate the specific concerns expressed in these posts by presenting some extracts from it. Two schools are particularly prominent in the discussion. These reflect the two main choices in types of international school highlighted above. The final section canvasses the ways in which the idea of the “eduscapes” aids comprehension of the ways in which *internationalism* is mobilised in different ways by middle-class parents to

ensure a safe or productive position for their child in a social hierarchy that is simultaneously local and international.

AN ONLINE DISCUSSION ON SCHOOL CHOICE

The analysis originates from an ethnographic research project which examines school choice in primary education in Germany.¹ The project is interested in which kinds of parents actively engage in the process of choosing schools for their child or children, how they inform themselves about these choices and whom they talk to. In other words, we are interested in how parents orient themselves in relation to the different schools available to them, and how they gather the information necessary to exercise choice. It is a study that brings into view the social dynamics and contestations, the negotiations and compromises surrounding the gathering of “detailed knowledge of how to move in the market” (Walford 1996: 105).

The German context is particularly instructive as school choice opportunities are still not self-evident and are accompanied by heightened levels of distrust and critique when compared with nations in which the notion of school choice has been naturalised and taken for granted (Forsey et al. 2008). This is especially true for primary education in Germany where school enrolment is in most cases governed by catchment areas. Whilst parents of primary-aged children are legally required to enrol their child in their catchment area, some parents pursue alternatives available to them, either through an expanding private school sector (Ullrich and Strunck 2012) or through state schools that have developed specialised programmes that open up possibilities for enrolments beyond catchment boundaries (Altrichter et al. 2011). Some parents also resist enrolling their children in schools the state requires them to attend because of particular features of these institutions which they perceive as undesirable or detrimental to their children’s education, particularly those schools in catchment zones with significant numbers of poorer migrant families (Baur 2013; SVR 2012). In a society that retains a strong commitment to egalitarian principles, parents in Germany have to perform “legitimising work” to justify their choice as something which is aimed at meeting the needs of their child and yet is not seeking any form of social segregation or elitism, which needs to be avoided (Breidenstein et al. 2014).

By accompanying families through the process of looking for the “best school” for their child, we seek to understand the kinds of identification and self-positioning parents engage in through the *process* of school choice.

Our target group is parents who are just starting to consider their choice of school when their child is four or five years old. In addition to interviews with parents before enrolling their child in school, we also attended various school “open days”, recording the ways in which the schools represent themselves to potential “clients”. While international schools were part of our sample, we struggled to recruit parents who were considering these schools. However, following some web searches on school choice in Berlin, a thread in an Internet forum on international schools emerged which proved to be a rich source of data. Typing “international schools in Berlin” into a well-known search engine, we located a number of active sites. The forum we chose to focus on (“Toytown”) carried the declaration of representing the “English-speaking crowd in Germany”.²

Internationally mobile parents wishing to identify potential schools for their children in yet-to-be-arrived-in places often wander into cyberspace to see what knowledge and insights are available to them. We argue that ethnographers have to follow them there (Forsey et al. 2015). The transnational nature of the particular target group engaging in this forum made them particularly interesting to us. The thread we have been following was started by a woman from San Francisco (or at least we assume she is a woman) with the site nickname of Adelle on 11 May 2008. The thread remains active to this day. By the time we ended data collection for our research in 2015, there were 287 posts, made by more than 180 contributors, spread over 15 pages. Nearly 35,000 views were recorded during the period of our investigation from May 2008 to June 2014. We coded the posts inductively, identifying the key topics and issues the contributors engaged with.

Adelle opened with the following post³:

adelle 11.May.2008

Hello!

I have three children and will be moving to Berlin in two years. At that time, they will be 5, 9, and 13. The older children attend a Waldorf school here in America, and I am in the information gathering phase. I know what the options are - Waldorf, International - but could use some real advice from those who have been down this road before. Many thanks in advance!

The mother naming herself Adelle is fairly typical of those engaging with the International Schools in Berlin (ISiB) thread that she initiated. She is internationally mobile, and needing to relocate herself and her

family to Berlin. Clearly she has no experience or knowledge of the Berlin educational scene and, not surprisingly, anticipates that there may be differences between the school choice situation in America and Germany. At the same time, she is already identifying “what the options are”. It is a very focussed request that establishes a particular kind of choice framework within which she wants to consider how to educate her children when she moves to Berlin. She is seeking “real advice from those who have been down this road before”, supposedly unwilling to rely only on the official information provided in the homepages of schools.

Uncertainty is an obvious problem that many parents have to deal with when it comes to choosing schools for their children. For globally mobile parents the situation is even more complex: They are not familiar with the local school landscape, nor are they familiar with the German school system. In many instances the families are unable to visit schools prior to arriving in Berlin, yet they have to make a decision about where to enrol their child/children prior to arriving. They are therefore unable to acquire insider and informal knowledge, which may be just as critical in helping them to make a decision (Krüger 2014).

The ISiB thread highlights that parents are not only concerned about finding a good school, but also about how their children will cope with the transition to a new school and new system. Language proficiency is one obvious point of concern: Is it necessary to speak German for a child when he or she comes to school? How strange will the experience of a German school be for them? How will it affect their older children’s chances of applying to university? School fees were highlighted by some as a particular concern, with parents also expressing misgivings about the high costs associated with certain international schools in Berlin, most notably the British International School, which charges up to €14,000 per year. Parents also discuss access to certain schools and seek to debate differences between teaching and learning methods. Other topics included: outside school activities and occurrence of bullying within schools. Most fascinating to us was the vivid *dispute* that arose about the value and relevance of intercultural and bilingual experiences for a child’s education. This debate captures a critical aspect of the school landscape and is relevant to our engagement with the question of how processes of internationalisation initiated by increasing global mobility shape what is understood as a worthy form of education.

TWO VERSIONS OF MOBILITY

The ISiB thread very quickly shapes the debate about school choice for internationally mobile middle-class parents by highlighting only a small number of potential schools in Berlin. The thread centres mainly around two schools: the John F. Kennedy School (JFKS) and the Nelson Mandela School (NMS). Close to half of the posts discussing specific Berlin schools in the ISiB thread mention, or are specifically focused on, JFKS and/or NMS (48%). JFKS and NMS are particularly attractive to parents as they are state-supported schools, and therefore do not charge fees.

As the screenshot of the webpage from the JFKS shows, the school has a 50-year tradition of catering to American families posted to Berlin either through the military or more recently as members of the diplomatic corps. The school is a “bilingual, bicultural German–American tuition-free public school” and declares that it incorporates the best of both American and German school curricula. The school guarantees entrance to children of American Embassy staff based in Berlin, but otherwise declares itself to be an academically selective school with priority for enrolments given to students who are siblings of current JFKS students, those with two American parents and those who are the children of JFKS teachers. It is clear from the website that the school receives more applicants than it can satisfy (<http://jfks.de/admissions/us-embassy-families/>, accessed 04 November 2015).

NMS also promotes itself to the children of diplomats and those posted into various government departments—thereby catering to what it calls “highly mobile families”. It is also a bilingual school—German and English—and students have to pass a language test in their second language before being permitted entry. Whereas in the past it catered for a limited number of students whose families resided in Berlin on a permanent basis, the demand for places among the highly mobile population has caused the school to rescind this possibility in recent times. The screenshot copied in below makes it clear that NMS is a selective school with language competence a vital element of the selection criteria (<http://www.sisberlin.de/about-nms/admissions.html>, accessed 04 November 2015).

We suggest that the dominance of the two schools in the thread draws attention to two different styles of *choosing international*, styles which are apparent from the beginning of the discussion by Adelle. We argue that at the very beginning of the thread, in 2008, particular understandings about

“internationality” were already set out, thereby shaping future engagement with the forum.

“jedi” is one of the first to answer Adelle:

jedi 16.May.2008

Hi, I was in the same situation last year and had no other option but the berlin international school as the british school was way too expensive. B.I.S is ok although it does cost a lot specially if you got a few kids.

why dont you guys try the John F Kennedy school as they do give preference to americans and its very good from what ive heard...being australian we didnt qualify!!!

As its state and embassy supported it doesnt cost that much and from what i hear the education standard is pretty good and compatible with the US system.

Good luck and do pm when you get here if you need any help.

cheers

Within three hours of this first mention of JFKS the reactions started to flow:

lolo 16.May.2008

John F. Kennedy forget about it...your kid will never get into college. Its got a bad name.

colinmanning 16.May.2008

The Nelson Mandela school is a state funded school (i.e. not private) and is excellent - my daughter is there. Getting in is not always easy, but they have a well defined acceptance process (outlined on their web site) and it is applied very fairly.

From what I hear JFK is not a good school, and it seems to be an American enclave in Berlin - so your kids will not benefit from the wonderful multi-cultural experience that can be growing up in Berlin.

Colin

With these two posts a controversy is established which arose repeatedly in subsequent years. The participant calling himself “colinmanning” was quite active in the thread over 5 years, posting altogether 24 times.

The next morning the discussion continued as follows:

adelle 17.May.2008 - 07:57 hrs

Lolo, Are you kidding about college, or serious? I'm interested in your perspective. Thanks!

sunny 17.May.2008 - 09:28 hrs

JFK school has a unique history in Berlin. And to understand the school you have to understand its history. It was set up in the 1960's as a free, German public school governed under the Berlin House of Representatives for the purpose of promoting "intercultural understanding" between the German and Americans. That's their charter and that's why they are not international in scope.

colinmanning 17.May.2008 - 10:32 hrs

And thus my comment on the JFK school being an "American enclave in Berlin" - not an international school but one that focusses on maintaining very American values for the kids. If that's what you want for your kids that's your choice. However I believe in that case that your kids are missing out on one of the great aspects of growing up in Berlin, which is the open multi-cultural environment that exists here.

In this sequence it becomes apparent that the two schools represent different concepts of internationality. Initial responses centre on school-quality, but clearly there are concerns about the social and cultural aspects of the contrasting choices available to families. According to the argument put forward by *colinmanning*, the choice before parents is also about the sort of relationship families will establish with their place of location. *Colinmanning* argues strongly that the JFKS not only favours Americans, but aims to maintain "very American values" in a city he characterises as an "open multi-cultural environment". According to *colinmanning* JFKS isolates itself from its surroundings, leading him to question its status as an "international school". Obviously this is a controversial position given that the thread's focus on "International schools in Berlin" and the claim JFKS makes to being truly "international".

The discussions around JFKS arise several times in the subsequent years following similar lines of argumentation. For example, Jane Reey reports deciding against Nelson Mandela, "*because it is VERY international ... people from ALL over*"—choosing JKFS instead. Among the several reasons offered she mentions the following: "*My children will get the benefits of some American culture while they grow up here (celebrating thanksgiving, Halloween, and the language of course) ...*" (post #64).

JFKS is controversial on this site for a variety of reasons. Significantly, it is often portrayed as promoting an American way of schooling, if not life, within the midst of Berlin. This makes it attractive for families who come to Berlin from the USA and who defend their choice of school on the grounds of similarity to the schools they have experienced. One motive identified by a contributor to the thread is a "smooth transition".

It is clear from this discussion that JFKS stands for a model of mobility that does not aim at (complete) integration or assimilation into the new culture but rather at keeping a sense of one's own (American) culture—and, above all, providing children with a sense of the culture of their descent. This is a model of mobility which tries to include the possibility of going back—or going elsewhere. Migrants working within this model do not appear to settle anywhere for very long, but base their school choices decisions on the possibility of moving again. And like any parents used to a high-stakes examination system that determines which university their offspring can go to, they are keen to ensure that their child/children is/are not disadvantaged by the educational choices made on their behalf. Such families look for a familiar type of school, one resembling what they might find upon returning to North America.

Naturally enough this standardising (globalising) of American (school) culture is contested. Other families prefer models of mobility emphasising some form of integration into the local conditions—especially when these are perceived as “multi-cultural”. Understanding oneself as part of the kinds of multi-cultural setting that can be found in many of the metropolises of the world, offers another way of dealing with the tension between mobility and the reality of living in a “local” space for at least some of that time. The Nelson Mandela School represents a choice that meets the needs of this preferred mode of mobility.

The common feature of both versions of mobility is the crucial role the school plays within it. Schools are not only perceived as institutions of qualification and important agents in the formation of future careers but also as agents of socialisation and enculturation. They help imprint children into some form of cultural practice that will equip them for further educational opportunities and life experiences that enable them to at least maintain the place they currently occupy in the social strata.

Schools can offer opportunities for mobility and being locally positioned—become part of a local community, but also ensuring these children can stay mobile. The two types of mobility articulated within the thread that we have analysed—moving to Berlin to stay, or remaining mobile—shape the “eduscape” found in Berlin.

A GLOBALISED “EDUSCAPE”?

How might we theorise this attempt by globally mobile parents to reach into the “global microspaces” (Ball and Nikita 2014) of the Berlin eduscape? “Scapes” as delineated by Appadurai are not only characterised by

interrelatedness and connection; they are also disjunctive, fluid and perspectival—that is to say they are not “objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision” (Appadurai 1996: 33). As already intimated, the idea of the “eduscape” not only describes a globalised educational market and the flow of educational practices; it also captures the *specificities* of the relation between the local and the global with regards to the idea and practice of education. In our understanding, the “eduscape” refers to the specific part education takes in a globalised world. The eduscape affects and demands the localisation of any family regardless of their mobility status. From the perspective of globally mobile parents, and increasingly from that of local parents, the eduscape should simultaneously provide a concrete social surrounding while also promoting their child’s future mobility. An “eduscape” not only consists of league tables and global requirements to measure the “output” of schools as discussed by Stronach (1999); it is also made up of concrete and located schools, of parents and children loaded as they often are with aspirations and anxieties (Campbell et al. 2009). Additionally they are increasingly gathered around ideals expressed in terms of “internationality”, however this is understood.

The ISiB thread offers some insight into how globally mobile parents try to come to terms with the local conditions of schooling in Berlin. At the same time it reveals a very particular view of ways in which the landscape of Berlin Schools is constructed within and through the discourse of the globally mobile parents moving to Berlin. The John F. Kennedy School and Nelson Mandela School loom large as centrally important schools in the global city of Berlin. Private international schools, other bilingual schools, as well as *Waldorfschule* are canvassed, but do not figure significantly in the discussions. Looking in from the outside, at the Toytown Germany site at least, we see a Berlin “eduscape” dominated by two summits with much that is *terra incognita* surrounding them. The two peaks that are JFKS and NMS attract attention from people from all over the world, but as with all *scapes*, people view them differently depending upon their needs, wants, cultural training and individual aesthetics. The emphasis on these two schools is partly related to the peculiarities of selection based on who “turns up” for the debate, but is also caused by the relative prestige of these two schools and their attractiveness as state-supported, free, but exclusive, schools.

The perspectives on the Berlin school landscape refracted through the online discussion occurring between people based in different parts of the world differs markedly from those we heard narrated when discussing school choices face-to-face with parents resident in Berlin itself. Returning

our gaze to the local discourse on school choice, we find yet further understandings of how internationalisation shapes education and educational desires in Berlin and beyond. Based on 30 interviews with middle-class parents in Berlin it became apparent that the local school choice discourse also integrates a focus on “international” schools, at least among some. In contrast to the online discussion, participants living locally were strongly localised by “catchment areas”. And we found how this affects the articulation of choice. To actually *choose* a school they have to think and act beyond the catchment area, and in turn, then, *become mobile*. The desire to avoid the educational experiences provided by the local state-run school is fairly widespread, but being able to move outside of their catchment area is not a decision that can be taken for granted in the same way as it can by “outsiders” moving to Berlin. Locals need to justify their choices to move beyond the local catchment zone, and they are faced with the dilemma of having to legitimise this desire within a national discourse of social justice. In contrast, the transnational choosers are not pinned down by catchment areas at all; there is no discussion of these, or of any obligations they may need to choose a local school once they are “in place”.

Whereas within the ISiB thread few negative connotations were raised in relation to “internationalisation” and education, this was not the case in our discussions with local parents—where particular types of internationalisation were construed negatively. Schools associated with large numbers of Turkish or Arab pupils and small numbers of native German-speaking ones were to be avoided in their view. These schools were rarely labelled “international”, but rather they tended to be stigmatised for their “non-German-speaking origins” (“*nicht deutscher Herkunftssprache*”). In these particular cases, non-German languages were heavily problematised (Roch et al. 2017).

In stark contrast, we find a growing number of primary schools with bilingual profiles where the notion of “internationality” engendered a more *promising* tone. One characteristic feature of the Berlin eduscape is the rise of “international” schools offering bilingual education. Between 2004 and 2006 different bilingual private schools were founded such as the “Metropolitan School”, the “Cosmopolitan School”, the “Lomonosow-Schule” and the “Phorms Schule”. In addition there are, at last count, 17 state-run schools in Berlin which are accredited as “Europaschule”, for which they are required to have bilingual profiles and are only open to pupils who pass a language test. The main language coupling is German–English, of which there are 17 schools. There are also German–French and

German–Spanish schools and, more recently still, schools which teach in Chinese and Japanese alongside German. Significantly, despite people of Turkish origin constituting 20% of Berlin’s migrant population, the largest minority group in the city, Berlin Mitte has only one bilingual Turkish–German School. In such a context, with a growing segment of “international” and bilingual schools in the Berlin school landscape, education somehow being “international” is becoming increasingly desired—where speaking more than German competently (in particular English) is seen as central to accessing a globalised world and cosmopolitan culture.

Have we found there any commonalities and connections between understandings of internationalisation and (elite) education within our analysis of the online ISiB forum and interviews with local parents? On an initial analysis they do not seem connected at all; there is very little attention paid to the newly created bilingual schools in the online site, whilst JFKS and NMS are not mentioned in our interviews with “the locals”. The perspectives seem completely different between the two groups, highlighting different schools that address different problems. While local families are initially bound to catchment areas and desired moves outside of these zones have to be justified, choice is taken for granted in the global online forum—concerns over “problematic” schools in particularly socially and ethnically heterogenous areas are not recognised.

Looking more closely we have identified a *common* problem raised by both groupings—a concern with the *composition of the pupils* in a school. An underlying concern for the international and the local participants, associated with school choice, centres around concerns about an overwhelming heterogeneity of certain types of pupils. Class filters appear to be activated, which for all of the avowed commitment to a “multi-cultural” and “cosmopolitan” experience, refer to a particular form of difference, one that coalesces around the taste and interests of a broad grouping of the middle class. These strategies of social emplacement are consistent with contemporary sociological thought regarding class as a practice, as a set of cultural proclivities which guide those positioning themselves in the broad middle spaces between the more rigidly positioned upper class and the “underclass” (Kincaid 2016). The middle classes are concerned with the signs and symbols of status as much as they are with income. In this regard, English language skill serves as a class marker, a clearly distinctive feature of choosing “the right sort of school”—in seeking to be amongst other people who speak English or would like to speak English, one can more or less be assured of meeting a similar “class” of person.

When it comes to young children and to primary school education, the parents' concerns emphasise the school as a place of socialisation rather than as a place for qualification and for gathering certain competencies. Schools loom as places of risk, a domain outside the influence of parents, and potentially ruled by dystopic images of unruly mobs, underpinned by threats of violence and disenchantment. This imagery threatens the future potential of one's children. The parents under consideration are seeking a safe place for their children, a task whose difficulties are often magnified either by having to choose from far away or because the families in question are "caught" in the legal and social entanglements of neighbourhood schools and their catchment areas. In either the "cosmopolitan" version or in the globalised American version of schooling, "internationality" stands for social distinction and for a certain belonging. There is a paradoxical drive towards homogeneity in a so-called global city among globally and socially mobile adults, who are seeking to raise their children in particular ways.

Our case study highlights the notion of "internationality" as the significant driver of processes of social positioning for parents seeking to socially and culturally locate their families in the eduscape of a globalising city. This drive is much more significant than commitments to educational values related to language skills or other such academic qualities. "International" schools give the eduscape a particular shape. At first glance this appears to refer to globalisation and cosmopolitanism—but on closer inspection reveals how contested "internationality" itself is and how deeply it is rooted in the *local* conditions of schooling and an ongoing search for social distinction. There is not just one form of distinction of course, and parents choose between idealised versions of a particular cultural formation based on imagined national values or a multi-cultural formation based on imagined cosmopolitan values. Ultimately both work to enhance the prestige of the receiver of the educational practices associated with the ideal types of schooling represented by JFKS and NMS. These differences and the ways they shape future outlooks and practices offer significant insights into how middle-class families with international mobility intentions may seek to secure their children's safe passage into an ever-developing global middle-class elite.

NOTES

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2. See <http://www.toytowngermany.com/forum/topic/96588-international-schools-in-berlin>
3. NB: All online material is quoted verbatim and uncorrected.

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