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**The Three Rs: Parental Risk Management Strategies in the International Secondary Education Market**

Risk permeates all aspects of modern life, and the International Secondary Education Market (ISEM) is no exception. Drawing on empirical data, this paper considers a specific type of risk; namely, the potential loss of cultural identity, which Nigerian parents associate with educating their children in the West. The article argues that Nigerian families employ three key risk management strategies (the right time; the right country; and the right school – or the 3Rs) in their attempt to mitigate and/or avoid this perceived risk. Adopting a broadly socio-cultural analysis of risk, the paper argues that parents’ understanding of risk as well as the type of risk management strategy they use are shaped by socio-cultural factors such as religion, gender, and social class. Data from the study indicates that cultural and religious beliefs do not only influence which of their children parents choose to invest in, and in which country they chose to educate them, as certain bodies are rendered more ‘risky’ and in need of closer monitoring.

***Keywords*:** Risk, Risk management strategies, ISEM, Nigerian parents, culture, Western liberalism

Introduction

*The different social principles that guide behaviour affect the judgment of what dangers should be most feared [and] what risks are worth taking* (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983, p. 6).

Danger, threat and uncertainty are some of the things that come to mind when one thinks of risk. Yet, as some scholars have argued, risk is a subjective concept and what is considered as risk will vary from one individual to another (Slovic, 2001). Beck (1992) notes that risks “only exist in terms of the […] knowledge about them. They can be changed, magnified, dramatized or minimised within knowledge, and to that extent they are particularly open to social definition and construction” (p. 23). Slovic (2001) went further, arguing that “there is no such thing as ‘real risk’ or ‘objective risk’” (p. 19). Nonetheless, Rosa (1998) defines risk as “a situation or an event where something of human value (including humans themselves) is at stake and where the outcome is uncertain” (p. 24).

Whether it is the impact of the democratization of education on middle class social positioning (Bourdieu, 1984; Ball, 2003), or the threats to white working-class identity (Archer & Hutchings, 2000; Reay, 2010; Stahl, 2015), risk in education has been thoroughly researched. In contrast, there is a dearth of literature on risk in the international secondary education market (ISEM).[[1]](#endnote-1) Rather, current studies on non-Western consumption of international schooling have mainly focused on the benefits and gains of the ISEM (Kenway & Fahey, 2014; Sin, 2013). A primary aim of this article is to address this lacuna by examining affluent Nigerian parents’ views of the ISEM, thus making a significant contribution to the ISEM scholarship. This article focuses on the specific type of risk that affluent Nigerian parents associate with educating their children in the West. I also explore how these parents attempt to minimise or avoid this perceived risk(s) using three specific risk management strategies, which I theorize as: 1) the Right time; 2) the Right country; and 3) the Right school. To paraphrase Beck (1992), a risk management strategy is theorised here “as a systematic way of dealing with […] the insecurities induced and introduced by modernization [and globalisation] itself” (p. 21).

The paper starts by defining this market through the identification of the main characteristics of the ISEM before providing a definition of ISEM that indicates how the field will be interpreted within this paper. Definition of the ISEM is followed by a critical description of the social-cultural perspective of risk before providing an analysis of risk in education. Following this, I discuss the research design and methodology used in the study. The third section presents the data, which is further divided into four subsections. The first section offers a nuanced analysis of elite Nigerian parents’ perceptions of risk, and the type(s) of risk(s) they associate with educating their primary and/or secondary aged children in a Western-based private boarding school. The second, third and fourth sections provide a systematic analysis of the three risk management strategies - the ‘Right time’, ‘Right country’ and ‘Right school’ used by parents to circumvent the perceived risk(s) of educating their children in the West. The analysis draws on empirical data from interviews with parents illustrating how parents’ perceptions of risk – and risky places – are nuanced by social class, culture and religion as well as a child’s gender.

International Secondary Education Market: Characteristics and Definitions

Bunnell (2014) posits that the field of international education is incredibly diverse, “encompassing a multitude of different institutions, all operating under a vague and increasingly less-relevant umbrella term of ‘International Education’” (p.1). It is therefore not surprising that there is currently no cohesive definition of ISEM. Within academic scholarship, the ISEM has been defined through four basic characteristics. First, the ISEM is a niche market within the broader private education sector. Specifically, the ISEM has emerged from, and is necessitated by the expatriate “community’s need for schooling” as well as the increased demand for Anglo-Western education by non-Western elites (Tarc & Tarc, 2015, p.40). Secondly, the ISEM caters to small exclusive social groups such as the “super rich” (Koh & Kenway, 2012, p.333) and “emerging new rich” (Tarc & Tarc, 2015, p.35) living in non-Western countries. Third, the ISEM functions as an education market for the exclusive sale of Western educational products to predominantly non-Western consumers (Ayling, 2015a). Fourth, due partly to its wealthy clientele (Epstein, 2014), and partly to the use of Western curriculum and pedagogies (Ayling, 2015a), schools operating within the ISEM occupy the highest and most privileged position within the local/national private education sector (Ayling, 2015a).

In line with these characteristics, I use the term ISEM to describe a particular field of education within which private international schools with international affiliations and/or reputations operate. As a global market, the ISEM not only allows the buying and selling of international school,[[2]](#endnote-2) but also facilitates the flow of Western ‘knowledge’ from the West to non-Western nation-states. Integral to its origin and sustainability the ISEM has a close relationship to elite international schools within non-Western societies as well as private boarding schools in Western countries such as the UK (Ayling, 2015a; Brooks & Waters, 2015). Therefore, the ISEM is theorised in this paper as a niche education market, which does not only allow the importation and exportation of Western education models and ideologies, but more importantly, it enables the consumption of Western schooling by non-Westerners around the globe.

Studies have shown that international schooling at home or abroad is a very profitable type of cultural capital especially when the recipient is from a non-Western country (Kenway & Fahey, 2014; Sin, 2013). With reference to higher education, Borjesson et al. (2007) argue that educational failure in a Western country can still guarantee non-westerners success in his or hercountry of origin while educational success in a Western country is synonymous with global success. As well as minimising the risks of social reproduction (Ayling 2015b), studies in the United States (Borjesson and Broady, 2005), Canada (Water, 2006, 2007) and the United Kingdom (Ayling, 2015b) also demonstrate that such an education guarantees the accumulation of highly profitable institutionalised and embodied forms of cultural and symbolic capital for non-Westerners.

Given the obvious benefits of schooling in the West, it is not surprising that literature on the ISEM has focused more on gains and benefits and less on loss and risk. Although studies have shown an increase in the consumption of international schooling by non-Western parents (Tarc & Tarc, 2015), very few studies have explored, hitherto, non-Western parents’ views of, and concerns about, educating their young children in Western-based private boarding schools which are in no way risk free. I contend that the neglect of non-western parents’ perceptions of the ISEM inadvertently constructs them – in this case parents from Africa – as uncritical and unreflective consumers of goods and services sold in the ISEM. The latter point is significant as it has broader racial and cultural implications(Fanon, 1967/2008). Nigeria, and Africa in general, has been shown to be an important market for western-based private international schools (SCIS, 2013; Brooks, 2011). It is therefore important to understand African parents’ views of the ISEM: particularly since the ISEM is governed by western ideals and orthodoxies (Kenway & Fahey, 2014). Such an exploration will not only inform and shape the type of goods and services sold within the ISEM to African parents, but the knowledge gained from examining non-western parents’ views of the ISEM will also address the current narrow euro-centric view of the ISEM scholarship.

There is currently no up-to-date statistical data on the number of Nigerian children schooling in Western countries. Studies in England (Brooks, 2011) and Scotland (SCIS, 2013) however suggest that there are currently 804 and 871 students who identify themselves as Nigerian in private boarding schools in England and Scotland respectively (Brooks, 2011; SCIS, 2013). It is important to note that the data from England only accounts for children with Nigerian passports and not Nigerian children with British passports, of which there are a few (Brooks, 2011).

Theorising Risk

Adopting a broadly socio-cultural perspective, the article theorises that perceptions of risk are shaped and influenced by “the sociocultural context in which individuals are situated and through which they make judgements about risk” (Lupton, 1999:3). Specifically, the theoretical analysis is in line with Lupton’s postulation that “understandings of risk are […] established via acculturation and feeling, and not simply rationalistic, or based on cognitive assessment” (1999, p.76). In exploring how Nigerian elite parents negotiate risk in the ISEM market, I seek to make theoretical connections between risk and social structures, where parents’ understanding of risk and the risk management strategies they adopt are constrained by cultural practices and social class. Data from parents’ interview transcripts is used to reveal how the internalisation of cultural norms and beliefs rendered certain bodies as more susceptible to risk and constructed others as ‘good’ investment.

Broadly speaking, the socio-cultural perspective on risks offers;

A view on risk that goes beyond a focus on the individual and her or his psychological or cognitive response to risk to an interest in the sociocultural context in which individuals are sited and through which they make judgements about risk. (Lupton, 1999, p. 3)

Clearly the discourse of risk, and particularly the concept of risk management strategies, presupposes human agency and rationality (Jaeger et al., 2001). However, Luhmann (1993/2002) points out that individuals’ understanding of the world and risk is constrained by the social systems and culture within which they are situated. According to Loustaunan and Sobo, (1997) culture is what “guides how people live, what they generally believe and value, how they communicate, and what are their habits, customs, and tastes, [it] is a kind of knowledge that we use and act [with]” (p. 9). Extending the argument, Bourdieu (1984), using habitus as a theoretical tool, writes, “the cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalised, ‘embodied’ social structures” (p. 468).

Furthermore, Dean (1999, p. 131) posits that risk is “a way of – or rather a set of different ways of ordering reality.” By this logic, risk – either real or imagined – plays a role in maintaining class boundaries and the status quo (Beck, 1992). Since it affects all of us, “risk displays an equalizing effect” (Beck, 1992, p.35) however, individuals’ conceptions of risk, as well as their access to different types of risk management strategies needed to mitigate and reduce the potential negative impact of risk, vary considerably. As a consequence, there will be different outcomes with regards to the level and types of risks individuals perceive to be exposed to and/or protected from, which, in turn, translate into different realities.

Like every area of modern life, risks permeate the education market. Studies on education have shown that the schooling boom coupled with the pursuit of neoliberal governance in most countries have not only led to an over-production of risk in the education market, but also introduced other types of risks, such as the risk of choosing the wrong place and the wrong type of education (Oria, et al. 2007). As a market, the ISEM caters to affluent parents with an array of choices both at home and abroad to choose from. Paradoxically, having too many choices means there is “always a possibility of wrong or unsuccessful choice-making in the education market place” (Ball, 2006, p.266).

International schooling as a risk management strategy

The democratisation of education has meant that without the strategic selection of both *place* and *type* of education, the middle and the upper classes risk falling “into the homogenous, the undifferentiated” category (Ball, 2003, p.63; Weis & Cipollone, 2013). Byrne (1999) argues that “spatial location determines access to crucial social goods, and in particular the different kinds of […] education [which] have enormous significance for future life trajectory” (p. 110). Several studies have found that spatial mobility (within and between nation-states) is one of the means by which the privileged classes minimise educational risk and accumulate both institutionalised and embodied forms of cultural capital (Reay et al., 2007; Borjesson & Broady, 2005). Research has also found that, as a form of signification, “place can […] be so important that it constitutes capital in itself” (Borjesson et al., 2007, p. 2). That is to say that there is a “place-specific symbolic capital” (Borjesson et al., 2007, p. 2).

In their study of international schooling in Singapore, Kenway and Fahey (2014) argue that through participation in “global youth leadership programme,” students in elite international schools were “offered a strong sense of their own competence, agency and entitlement,” which, in turn, allows them “to imagine themselves as global leaders in various fields” (p. 191). In her study of middle class families in Hong Kong, Waters (2006) argues that educating their children in Canada was a type of social reproduction strategy used by Hong Kongese middle-classes to maintain their social and economic positions. Waters (2006) also posits that being educated in Canada was integral to the formation and acquisition of what she terms the Transnational Capitalist Class in Hong Kong.

The significance of acquiring Western education abroad rather than at home was further highlighted in Sin’s (2013) analysis of Malaysian students studying in UK universities. Sin writes;

Participants who would complete their education in Malaysia anticipated a lack of appreciation of their mode of study in the labour market, as opposed to their onshore counterparts [Malaysian students studying in the UK] who were believed to enjoy higher status recognition (p. 856).

In my own recent research, I found that by consuming international schooling abroad, Nigerian elite parents are able to present themselves as the distinguished possessors of high taste and the emerging rich (most of whom can only afford to consume international schooling in Nigeria) or “pretentious challengers” to use a Bourdieusian term (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 251 in Ayling, 2015b, p. 458). Crucially, I found that by educating their children in boarding schools with predominantly white pupils, Nigerian elite parents can construct their children as “the exceptions to the rule” (Kendall, 2002, p.15 in Ayling, 2015b, p. 462); that is, as one of the few Black people with similar moral values and intelligence as their White counterparts. Consequently, as well as being an exclusion strategy, the ISEM is also a consumption space where non-Western elites can and do *perform* their class.

Despite these perceived benefits, it is important to stress that this analysis is not intended to extol the virtues of the ISEM. Rather, I explore the perceived risks that non-western parents associate with educating their children in the West, specifically drawing on a case study of Nigerian elites. Whilst educating their children in UK-based private boarding school enables these parents to acquire the position of seniority within their social field, losing their children’s perceived ‘Africannesss’ or ‘Nigerianness’ poses a real risk to their children’s future status as local elites.[[3]](#endnote-3) This is because when stripped of their Nigerianness, their children will be unrecognisable as local/national elites and thus without value (Ayling, 2015b).

The West is often described as a liberal society (Siedentop, 2014), whereas African societies are described as deferential and conservative (Menkiti, 1984). Paradoxically, Western liberalism is often perceived by non-Westerners “as standing for indifference and permissiveness, if not for decadence” (Siedentop, 2014, p. 2). In African societies, such as Nigeria, children are not afforded similar rights and value as adults (Menkiti, 1984). Rather, children - and particularly girls - are expected to ‘know their place’ and be respectful, humble and subservient to their elders.

Given the distinct cultural differences between African and Western societies it should not be presumed that educating an African child in the West does not come with some risk. Through drawing on a sociocultural analysis of perceived risk and risk management, this paper advances the ISEM scholarship by problematizing the ISEM as risk-free to non-Western elite parents.

The Study

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger study that investigated the consumption of international schooling by affluent Nigerian parents. Both quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (semi-structured interview) data collection methods were used in the research. Drawing upon interviews from 25 Nigerian parents with children in private boarding schools in England and Canada, this paper reveals the specific type of risk that this cohort of parents associates with the ISEM. Furthermore, drawing upon both quantitative and qualitative data, the paper provides a systematic analysis of the three types of risk management strategies – Right time, Right country and Right school – that Nigerian parents employ to circumvent the perceived risk. The article also contributes to the on-going debate on the discourses of risk by capturing the specificities of non-Western understanding of risk as it pertains to the consumption of international schooling. This paper reports two of the key findings from the original study.

Since elites are difficult group to access (Harvey, 2010), a non-probability purposive and snowball sampling frames were used to recruit the research participants (Smith et al. 2009). With one exception, all the parents were recruited via third parties. Goldstein (2002) warns that “reliance on connections [can lead] to an unbalanced set of interviews” (p, 671), since different gatekeepers are likely to only recruit their kind. Although mothers were disproportionately represented in the research, this had less to do with the sampling frame used and more to do with how mothers tend to be the ones that come forward in school choice research (Williams, et al., 2008). Semi-structured interviews were used with all the participants. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Nigeria (Lagos, Abuja and Port-Harcourt) between 2012 and 2014 with a few conducted in London. All the interviews, with one exception, were held with only one parent.

Twenty-six Nigerian parents were recruited for the original study. This number consisted of 11 fathers and 15 mothers. One of the mothers in the study had sent her daughter to Ghana. Given the focus of the paper, data from this parent’s interview transcript will not be included here. Four of the 25 parents had sent their children to Canada while the other 21 parents had sent their children to the UK. The four parents who had sent their children to Canada were fathers and held managerial positions in Shell Petroleum Development Company, Nigeria, at the time of the fieldwork. The other group of parents consisted of fourteen mothers and seven fathers. The fathers in this group were mostly directors or CEOs of major organisations or owned their own firms. At the time of the fieldwork, two of the mothers held political appointments at federal and state levels. The other women either run their own businesses and/or are married to senior business executives.

Each of the parents was asked to complete a questionnaire, which provided socio-demographic data such as religion, education, ethnicity, age and gender. The quantitative data generated shows that the parents who had sent their children to the UK exhibited some of the characteristics of elites, such as power and high occupational position (Boyd, 1973). Given the huge differences in school fees between UK-based private schools and Canadian private schools (the quantitative data indicates that it costs twice as much to send a child to UK-based private boarding school as it does in Canada), coupled with the fact that parents that sent their children to Canada only held middle management position at the time of the study, these four fathers are described in this paper as middle-class. The data from these four middle-class parents are included in this paper as it highlights the influence of social class on individuals’ perception of risk and more importantly, their ability to manage risk. Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper to protect the participants’ identity.

Parents’ concern with the ISEM

*Culture is about where you come from. It links you with where you are from. The culture in Nigeria is different from culture here [UK] and with the skin they have which is the black skin, that culture [African/Nigerian] must show forth in them* (Mrs. Ola).

To gain a better understanding of the reasons why affluent Nigerian parents consume international schooling, parents were asked to explain what they perceived as the benefits of sending their children overseas for their education. It is therefore surprising to find that the rhetoric of loss and risk permeate parents’ narratives. Compounding the fear of not getting a good return for their investment by investing in the ‘wrong’ child, parents were also worried that educating their children in the West may result in their children losing their African identity.

As indicated in Mrs. Ola’s comment above, parents were keen to stress the importance of culture particularly in terms of its role in identity formation. Culture was perceived as a tether that binds one to their ancestral root. The implication of Mrs. Ola’s comment is the idea that having a black skin colour does not necessarily make one an African or indeed a Nigerian. Rather, to qualify as an African/Nigerian, one must also be able to, through actions and attitude, to ‘act’ their culture. Thus, for these parents, the formation of an African / Nigerian identity is dependent entirely on the acquisition and internalisation of what they perceived as African cultural norms, values and beliefs.

African culture is constructed in opposition to Western culture by parents in this study. For example, parents often describe African societies as “very conservative,” “traditional,” and “strict” while phrases such as “too much freedom” and “too liberal” were used to describe the West. The comment below is typical of parents’ views of Western societies.

The level of exposure of the average British child is not what I would wish for my child […] That kind of respect that my children are supposed to give to their seniors, I can’t find that in the average British child, you know. Their freedom ... *too* much of it, too much of exposure, too much disrespect (Mr. Akpan).

In considering African cultural values and norms, respect for one’s elders and knowing one’s place as a child were two of the reoccurring themes in parents’ narratives. Indeed, within this case study, there appears to be a consensus among parents that these are typically African traits. Hence Mr. Akpan’s comment that “I can’t find that [traits] in the average British child.” In other words, these traits are integral to the formation of their children’s African identity. Conversely, parents, for the most part, are of the view that Western liberalism has arrogated parents’ power to children. Consequently, children in the West are allowed to “do whatever they like” (Mrs. Philip) without any reproach from their parents. Liberty of this kind, and of this scale, is also perceived by parents as encouraging promiscuity in girls. Mrs Philips expanded on this saying that “by the time they [British girls] get to 15, 16, they have slept with many boys.” Given that modesty and virtuousness are integral to the construction of womanhood in African societies (Kontoyannis & Katsetos, 2010), exposure to such behaviour places these daughters’ identity as an African woman at risk.

Given parents’ negative views of Western values and practices, specifically, their fears that exposure to Western culture might lead to the loss of their children’s African identity, it is worth asking why these parents still chose to educate their young children in Western-based private boarding schools. There are two interrelated reasons why elite Nigerian parents pursue elite Westernized education for their children. The first could be found in Mrs. Ayo’s comment that they have not “found anything better [schooling wise] at home.” The second reason why affluent Nigerian parents educate their young children in Western-based boarding school is to enable their children become part of the global elites (Ayling, 2015b). However, faced with the dichotomies between benefits and losses, parents have had to adopt three key risk managing strategies, which enable them to protect their children from what they perceive as the corrupting influence of Western ideals and values while schooling in the West.

The 3Rs: ‘Right time’, ‘Right country’ and ‘Right school’

The findings presented thus far have shown that parents do have concerns about educating their primary and/or secondary school aged children in the West. To avoid getting what Mr. Oye and other parents describe as a “Whats-up child,” – a phrase used to describe an over-Westernised African child – I argue that parents employ three key risk management strategies in order to ensure that their children retain their Nigerianness. These strategies; Right time, Right country, and Right school, allow parents to feel that they can maintain their children’s Nigerian identity while providing their children with what they perceive as “the best type of education money can buy” (Mr. Odili).

Right time

*We wanted to make such that they know our ways. As you probably know, our ways are different from the Oyinbo [white person] ways. We have very different cultures. If we send them when they are still very young, they will end up not knowing our culture* (Mrs. Okwu).

Parents often described the decision to send their primary and/or secondary schooled aged children abroad for their education as a “difficult choice” (Mr. Odili) or “tough decision” (Mr. Dele). Mrs. Kuti puts it aptly; “The sad thing is that you miss your children growing up. That’s just it and it is really painful as a mother.” Having taken the difficult decision to consume international schooling abroad, parents need to ensure that they send their children at the Right time. This allows them to maximise their financial investment while safeguarding their children’s cultural identity at the same time.

Data from parents’ interview transcripts indicates that the Right time is determined by various factors. For example, parents believed that it is the Right time to send their children to study overseas when they have “developed and have [acquired] their own culture” (Mr. Bala). Or when children “have accumulated enough knowledge” (Mrs. Seiya) about their home culture. Conversely, to send one’s child to the West without ensuring that they have acquired sufficient knowledge of their own culture creates what is perceived as a cultural vacuum within the child. As the quote below indicates, this will put their children in a very vulnerable and risky position.

We kept them here (Nigeria) until we felt they are old enough to go. When they have accumulated enough knowledge of our culture before we can let them leave for England. We wanted to make learn about their own culture first [...] because we know that if they leave without them then they can easily be corrupted, they will be filled with everything else but their own culture and that’s how you end up losing them. (Mr Akpan)

The idea that children had to be filled with “enough knowledge of [their] culture before leav[ing] for England” is rooted in the contentious notion that cultural identity emanates from one source “with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of references and meaning” (Hall, 1994, p. 393). Such a perspective of identity formation is hugely problematic as it invariably creates “the logic of a binary of opposition” (Hall, 1993, p.6), which in this case is authentic and inauthentic identity. Moreover, the idea that identity emanates from one stable source is ill-equipped to comprehend the complex nature and sources of identity formation in the 21st century where globalisation has not only limited the way in which people have control of their lives but has also provided individuals with an assortment of possible sources for identity formation (Dolby, 2000).

Yet the notion of authenticity plays a crucial role in elite identity formation (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, Nigerian elite parents consume white British elitist spaces and schools because of their perceived authenticity (Ayling, 2015a). Such consumption practices allow Nigerian elite parents to claim seniority within the local elite group while instigating social closure at the same time (Bourdieu, 1984). Authenticity is also used to legitimize these parents’ social and economic advantage (Skeggs, 2004). Therefore, ensuring that children acquire knowledge of their culture from the ‘original,’ and thus authentic source, is as much about maintaining these parents’ elite status as it is about safe-guarding their children’s African identity.

In considering how parents negotiate risk, the data indicates that parents’ perceptions of the Right time are linked to the child’s age. However, the Right time is not a fixed pre-determined period. Rather, it is flexible precisely because it is determined by, and based entirely on parents’ intuition. In other words, there were no objective systematic processes by which parents measured or ascertained whether their children had accumulated enough cultural knowledge. Consequently, the perception of Right time varied considerably between parents; ranging from aged nine to 16.

The data suggests that in trying to keep children back until such a time when parents feel that their children have acquired enough culture, parents may inadvertently be risking their children’s academic success.

My first son did only one year before going to do his A levels and I found out that he couldn’t catch up quickly. He didn’t finish the GCSE syllabus. He was supposed to do two years for GCSE first that was why I moved the second one quickly and my last child quickly so that they don’t experience what he went through. (Mrs Seiye)

Mrs. Seiye’s words highlight the complexity and ambiguity of the Right time as a risk management strategy. On the one hand, it allowed parents to “fill” their children up with their own cultural beliefs and values, while it exposed these parents’ children to the risk of academic failure on the other hand. To reduce the chances of exposing their children to social, cultural and/or academic risks, parents must become “risk monitors and calculators” (Crook, 1999, p.171). That is, these Nigerian parents must become prudent and adept risk-takers and decide what risks are worth taking and those that are not (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1983).

The ‘Right country’ and Gender Bias

To maintain the cultural values, beliefs, and customs that they have instilled in their children prior to sending them overseas, parents must ensure that they educate their children in the Right country. The data indicates that parents’ perception of the Right country is based on how compatible they feel a particular country in the West is to African values and culture. The data shows that although the US was considered, it was rejected by all the parents because, as Mr Odili explained, “living in America can do a lot of damage to a child.” The riskiness of the US was further emphasised by Mrs. Ayo, who remarked that “you would probably end up with a rock star if you send your child to America.” The figure of the “rock star” served as a euphemism for Western excesses in the form of drugs, alcohol and sex.

***The UK***

*The UK is still conservative and that’s what I like about it. Children are taught respect and how to talk and children still know their place* (Mrs Kuti).

The majority of the parents chose the UK because they believed that it “still keeps a lot of its conservativeness much more than you have elsewhere”(Mrs Bridge). The data also suggests that British colonial legacy has not only made “the UK more suitable than other countries,” as Mrs. Gbenga put it, but as she went on to explain, it had also meant “[Nigerians] are already used to [British] ways.” British colonisation of Nigeria has made the UK seemed both ‘similar’ and familiar to these parents. The perceived similarity of the British society with Nigerian society imbues parents with the reassurance that the sort of behaviours they value, such as deference and modesty, might still be found in the UK; albeit only among a certain class of people (Ayling, 2015b).

A legacy of education in the UK had provided some of the parents, such as Mrs Adu, with some knowledge of the British society and education system: “My husband and I both schooled here [UK] and I said I came at 13 […] I’m not familiar with any other part of Europe and I’m not familiar with the States.” Having first-hand experience of British private boarding schools had provided some of these parents with a knowledge of British private sector in particular, and the ISEM in general.

The ISEM market provides parents with a multitude of choices both in terms of where to educate their children as well as the type of school (mixed or single sex, faith school or a non-faith school) to which to send their children. However, as Ball (2006) posits, with increased choice also comes an equally increased chance of making the wrong choice**.** Good knowledge of ISEM enables parents to make the ‘right’ choice as well as to successfully manage and/or avoid risk in the ISEM (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983). However, a good knowledge of ISEM does not necessarily mean having knowledge of all the different Western countries and their respective educational systems. Rather, as these parents have demonstrated, good knowledge of the ISEM is knowing the ‘safest’ and most profitable country to educate one’s child.

***Canada***

Economic capital is crucial in individual’s ability to reflexively and effectively process risks. That is, to engage effectively in “identification, assessment, and management” of risk (Crook, 1999, p175). Evidence from the qualitative data indicates that none of the middle-class parents visited Canada prior to sending their children there; though interestingly, all four parents had visited the US and UK on “several occasions” (Mr. Dele). A couple of them had lived in the UK as a result of secondment. Given that these parents had rejected the US because of their ‘knowledge’ of the country, does it mean that Canada was chosen precisely because it is unknown? Also, why did these parents not choose the UK, which “they know very well” (Mr Eugene)? Particularly as they had not raised any specific concern about the unsuitability of the UK.

The quantitative data shows that it costs twice as much to educate a child in a UK-based private boarding school as it does in Canada. It was not surprising therefore that cost was indeed a major reason why these four parents chose to send their children to Canada instead of the UK. For example, Mr Akin explained his decision claiming that Canada is “comparatively cheaper than the US [and] the UK is still the most expensive.” Apart from the very expensive school fees, gaining admission into a UK-based private school is also a more difficult and expensive process than Canada. This is illustrated by Mr. Odili’s comment:

It involves a lot of travelling back and forth from the UK because my wife had made arrangements with about seven schools and we couldn’t see all of them in one trip so I think she ended up doing about two or three trips with our son. (Mr Odili)

In contrast, it takes as little as “three months from start to finish” (Mr Akin) to gain admission to a Canadian private boarding school. Furthermore, while most Canadian private boarding schools “will issue you the admission letter as long as you pay the first batch” (Mr Kome), that is, allow parents to pay in instalments, UK-based private schools demand full payment of fees before issuing admission letters.

The possibility of their children acquiring Canadian citizenship was another reason why the middle-class parents chose to send their children to Canada.

I believe the Canadians, if you go to school there in four years, by the time you leave you can almost get a job permit even before you leave school, two years after you leave school you can actually apply for permanent residency. So for me that was one of the deciding factors (Mr Akin).

Jaeger and colleagues (2001) assert that “all risks carry with them either danger or opportunity – potential for loss or gain” (p. 18). Within this logic, one might argue that these parents perceived the prospect of their children acquiring Canadian citizenship as a very profitable return for their financial investment, and one that outweighs any potential risk that the exposure to Canadian culture may cause their children. Put simply, the *known* - that is, a guaranteed citizenship for their children - offsets the risk of the *unknown*; that is, the impact that Canadian culture may or may not have on their children’s cultural identity. In their study, which examines British students’ choice of country when applying to international universities, Findlay and colleagues (2012, p.127) also noted that the acquisition of “long-term residence and citizenship” was a strong influencing factor.

Yet, this should not detract from the importance of economic capital in enabling parents to protect or reduce their children’s exposure to potential risks in the ISEM. Quite apart from the fact that it gives parents the confidence and means to comfortably engage with, and navigate their way through the ISEM, having large amount of economic capital allows parents to educate their children in countries with the most valuable place-specific symbolic capital (Borjesson et al., 2007). For example, as the quote below indicates, Canada was rejected precisely because the elite parents perceived it as having little symbolic capital.

I have been to Canada for holidays twice; we visited Canada as a family a while back. It is a nice place but the much I know of their education, I won’t want to send my children there. It is a glorified Ghana; it is not the kind of place we will send our children to. (Mrs Chuka)

Here, parents’ judgement of risk, and more importantly, acceptable risk, is influenced not necessarily by the culture of a country but by the type of families perceived to be sending their children to Canada. As Mrs Chuka stated, Canada is not for people like them. Sending their children to a place they perceive as second-rate – “*a glorified Ghana” –* poses a risk to their elite status (Bourdieu, 1993). Consequently, risk is being used by these parents to “establish and maintain the ideas about self and Other” (Lupton, 1999, p. 3). In other words, the ISEM has become a type of strategy of distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) used by Nigerian elites for the preservation of social status and the borderlines of class in contemporary Nigeria.

***Gender bias in ISEM***

*As a girl, I was particular and a bit concerned about releasing her to go to Europe […]. I found myself very very concerned, because she had an admission to go to A’level in London and I was a bit reluctant, luckily for me I got introduced to this university [in Saudi].* (Mr Abdu)

Parents’ attempt to manage risk in ISEM is implicated by their perceptions of gender norms. The data shows that a child’s gender influences parents’ country of choice as well as on which child they choose to invest. For example, even though Mr. Abdu (A Muslim father) had described the UK education system as the “best in the world” and thus “would have preferred all of them [children] to be in the UK,” he chose to send his daughter to Saudi Arabia while his sons were educated in the UK. Like Mr. Bala (another Muslim father), Mr Abdu was fearful that western liberalism would infringe upon his daughter’s identity as an African woman.

Typically, in traditional African societies, the female body is perceived as weak and lacking in self-control (Kontoyannis & Katsetos, 2010). Indeed, the practice of female genital mutilation in many traditional African societies like Nigeria is based on this construction (Kontoyannis & Katsetos, 2010). Central to the female genital mutilation practice is the idea of the promiscuity of women, which is feared will lead to sex before marriage. In a society where girls’ virginity is highly priced and perceived as the epitome of virtuousness, it goes without saying that girls will be subjected to a different and stricter moral code than boys. It also means that, in the context of ISEM, the penalties for adopting western practices and values are more severe for African girls than boys. As Mr Bala explained, “a girl that is too westernised has no place in our community. No one will want her for a wife.” Therefore, Mr Abdu’s decision to send his daughter to Saudi Arabia had enabled him secure his daughter’s religious and cultural identities.

Mr Abdu’s seemingly ‘illogical’ and ‘irrational’ decision illustrates Douglas’ (1992) theorisation that individuals’ perception of risk, and indeed the risk they choose to concern themselves with, is not determined by cognition, but rather by the “social forms in which those individuals construct their understanding of the world and themselves” (p. 12). According to Bourdieu (1977) traditional structures and social relations continue to be influential precisely because they are embedded in, and embodied by, individuals before they come to make decisions and long before they find themselves in situations that demand a decision. In other words, ‘rationality’ is an illusion precisely because it is “socially bounded” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 126).

The cultural construction of gender also appears to influence parents’ decisions about whether and how to invest in particular children in the ISEM. As she explained, Ms. Ambrose is “a single mother so […] can’t really afford to have both [of her] children in the UK.” Even though, as she went on to explain, “that would be the ideal scenario.” Yet, despite the fact that her son is the younger of her two children, and even though she acknowledged that her daughter will be “losing out” if she remained in Nigeria, Ms. Ambrose chose to send her son to the UK while her daughter remained in Nigeria.

Don’t forget he is my only son so even though he is younger than his sister, he is the man of the family. He is the head of the family. So, it is very important that he is well educated. (Ms. Ambrose)

This decision is clearly based on the construction of boys as playing a more important role than girls in the traditional African family. From this perspective, there is a risk attached to investing in a girl, especially in a situation where parents are constrained by finance. On the other hand, an investment in her son will yield the best return, since as the “head of the family” he is the one that will be responsible, financially and otherwise, for the family in the future. Therefore, the decision to send her son instead of her daughter to the UK, where he will receive the “best quality of education money can buy” (Ms. Ambrose), is influenced by her perception of a good return for her investment, itself shaped by her cultural beliefs and customs (Douglas, 1992). It goes without saying that apart from rendering the female body both as risky and more susceptible to risk, cultural beliefs also influence the quality of education girls receive in Nigeria (Theobald et al., 2007).

Right school

In considering the ISEM market, parents know that schools are unique social spaces where identities are created, challenged, and acquired. These parents consider it imperative that their children attend the “right” school, which they believed espouses similar values and ideals as them, thus safeguarding their children’s cultural identity while at the same time augmenting their symbolic and social capital. Data from the study indicates that only the elite parents used the Right school risk management strategy. Since the search for the right school seemed to involve several foreign trips, it is therefore not surprising that only the elite parents with the financial capability to carry out such endeavour adopted this risk management strategy. Instead, the middle-class parents relied entirely on education agents in Nigeria for their school choice in the ISEM.

Several factors, such as the type of ‘A’ level curriculum (International Baccalaureate or traditional A level) a school offers and a school’s position on the league table influenced parents’ school of choice in the UK. However, evidence from the data suggests that discipline was the most influencing factor when it comes to parents’ school choice decision in the ISEM. Indeed, factors such as good grades were considered as mere “bonuses,” which parents “don’t worry too much if they are not there” (Mrs Philips). However, parents do not “compromise on discipline” (Mrs. Bridge). The quote below shows that despite the fact that the first school she sent her daughter to was “very good in academic aspect,” the lack of discipline resulted in Mrs Philips taking her daughter to another school.

The school was very good in academic aspect but they lacked discipline because they allow the students to do whatever they wanted. It was excess. You know, like they go into town, they do all that things that we didn’t think it was right for 11 years old child to be doing you know. So, we decided to send her to this school. (Mrs. Philips)

Throughout the data there is a preference for faith schools specifically Christian schools as most of these parents describe themselves as Christians.

We are Catholics, I wanted one [school] that has spiritual bias, you know, that will keep him along those lines, you know? Someone who is God fearing, someone who is considerate, someone who will have good manners. (Mrs. Amechi)

However, the fact that non-Catholic parents also choose Catholic schools suggests that it is parents’ perception of faith school and its ability to discipline and instil its pupils with good morals rather than the school’s denomination that is influencing school choice here. As Mrs. Chuka explains, “The school they are in is a Catholic school, even though I’m not Catholic but I thought they are the ones that instil those things”; referring to discipline and good manners.

Parents considered faith schools more suited to educating Nigerian children because they espouse conservative rhetoric in terms of discipline and decorum, which of course fits well with parents’ own idea of good morals and behaviours. One might argue that a school’s religious status (for the elite parents at least) acts as an insurance policy, which guarantees the retention of their children’s African identity while allowing them to acquire what they perceived as the attributes of excellence (Ayling, 2015b). Musgrove (1970) asserts that elite schools are able to protect “the child from social promiscuity and contamination as effectively as the most jealous parental surveillance” (p. 124). Underlining this argument is the assumption that elite schools are superior moral and social enclaves that are different to, and apart from, the larger society within which they operate. Musgrove’s postulation resonates with the elite parents in this study. As Mrs. Kuti indicates, “Melberry is secluded and far away from bad influences and the trailer trash.” Similarly, Mr. Odili explains, “this school is not in London. You see all sorts in London. I see a lot of gay people and alcoholic on the streets of London. […] I don’t want my children to be exposed to these kinds of bad life.”

Parents do not only perceive geographical location as a safety feature of schools, but they also saw it as indicating the type of children that attend particular schools. The selection of a school based specifically on its geographical location (Reay et al., 2007), and social class make-up (Foskett and Hemsley-Brown, 2003), is a type of “elective belonging” (Savage, 2010, p. 116), used by the elite parents to communicate their social position. As Savage (2000) aptly argues “class identities are not to be found within talk about categories, but […] in practices of distinction and closure and in ‘aesthetics of distance’” (p.107).

As previously explained, the elite parents commented that they had chosen the UK because it had kept its “conservativeness.” However, given these parents’ preference for elite spaces and white British upper class culture (Ayling, 2015b), it is reasonable to assume that such references were in actuality to the White British upper-classes, rather than the British masses in general. By the same logic, it is UK-based British elite boarding schools rather, than the United Kingdom per se, that have maintained the traditions (and perceived morals and culture), which these parents associate with Britain of the colonial era, but still seek. In light of this observation, one might describe the Right school as a defensive fortress employed by parents to protect their children from the corrupting influence of western liberalism.

Conclusion

Whilst researchers have shown that the ISEM provide children from privileged background in non-western societies with an array of opportunities and advantages (Ayling, 2015b; Kenway & Fahey, 2014), in this article I have argued that attendance at these institutions is not risk-free but rather comes with its own set of unique problems that require careful strategizing. Specifically, the findings from this case study indicate that, in terms of risk, Nigerian parents are concerned that educating their young ‘impressionable’ children in the West may lead to the loss of their African identity and heritage.

By adopting a socio-cultural perspective on risk, this article provided a nuanced analysis of risk by examining the impact of social class, culture and religion on parents’ perceptions of risk as well as their understanding of ‘good’ investment in the context of the ISEM. Crucially, this perspective moves the debate on the consumption of schooling beyond the “rational economic relations of exchange between purchaser and provider” (Allatt, 1996, p. 166), to one that also considers the social and cultural as well as psychological implications (for both parents and their children) of educating primary and/or secondary school aged children of African descent in the West. The fact that parents described the decision to send their children to the West as ‘difficult’ gives some support to Allatt’s (1996) postulation of the consumption of schooling as a “moral transaction” *(*p. 166) and one which when examined within the private realm of child-parent relation is characterised by “sacrifice, […] love, trust, pride and risk” (Allatt, 1996, p. 166).

To secure their advantage while also protecting their children from what they perceived as the corrupting influences of western liberalism, I argue that the parents in this research employed three types of risk management strategies, namely; Right time; Right Country; and Right school, in their effort to circumvent the perceived risk in the ISEM. As a risk management strategy, The Right time allowed parents to “fill” their children up with adequate knowledge of their traditional culture and customs before sending them to the West. The data suggests that there is also a ‘wrong’ time to send children abroad for their education, which appears to have a negative impact on the child’s education achievement. Since the line between the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ time is quite blurred, parents are not only required to be effective “risk monitors and calculators” (Crook, 1999, p.171), but also adept risk-takers. Implicit in the Right time risk management strategy is the notion that parents are responsible for their children’s academic and social failures (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983).

The article also argues that not all strategies were accessible to all the participants, and neither were they all able to operationalize these risk management strategies with equal ease. The data shows how the Right school strategy could only be employed by the elite parents with the necessary financial capital. To put this differently, besides sending their children to a country that they barely knew, having limited financial resources meant that the middle-class parents could not utilise the Right school risk management strategy. This finding supports Beck’s (1992) assertion that it is the “the wealthy [that] can purchase safety and freedom from risk” (p. 35).

Furthermore, the paper argues that social class differences also affected parents “judgment of what dangers should be most feared [and] what risks are worth taking” (Douglas & Wildavsky, 1983, p. 6). Thus, while Canada was considered a risky place by the elite parents, primarily because it is accessible to those considered as beneath them, the middle-class parents regarded educating their children in Canada as a good return for their financial investment because of the possibility of acquiring a Canadian citizenship that it offered their children.

Findings from my research indicates that parents perceived western liberalism as not only allowing children ‘too much’ freedom but also encouraging promiscuity in girls. Since modesty and virtuousness are central to the construction of womanhood in African societies (Kontoyannis & Katsetos, 2010), I argue that educating one’s daughter in the West was considered by parents as too risky, even though such decisions might be disadvantaging their daughters. Additionally, I argue that cultural constructions of women as subordinate to men meant girls were often perceived by some parents as a risky investment, especially in cases where there were limited funds.

The findings presented in this article have shown both the subtle and complex ways in which non-western parents engage with ISEM. Therefore, far from being passive consumers of western goods and services (as the current lack of research on non-western parents’ views of the ISEM might suggest), the data suggests that the parents in my research are quite reflexive of their choices in the ISEM. Apart from being savvy and strategic users of the ISEM: optimising the opportunities that the ISEM provides through the careful selection of country and school, the selective use of white spaces and western culture in the ISEM clearly indicates that these parents have the skill and money (in the case of elite parents) to successfully and effectively appropriate; via their children, white culture. This is a very important point as blacks are often constructed as lacking this skill (Skeggs, 2004). Furthermore, I will argue that the elite parents’ desire to maintain in their children their cultural heritage and roots coupled with their preference for white British upper classes’ culture and elitist spaces is an indication that these parents perceived whiteness as mere artefacts that can be bought and used to augment and/or construct a desirable social identity for their children. In other words, the strategic consumption of international schooling allows Nigerian elite parents to use the most valuable aspects of different cultures (Africa and the West) “to create the greatest value” for themselves and their children (Skeggs, 2004:105).

Notes

1. The idea that education is a commodity and thus strategized and interacted with like any other commodity by those that provide or consume it has been long established (e.g. Cucchiara, 2008; Symes, 1998). Importantly, private education has been described as a 'positional goods’ (Adnett & Davies, 2002). A positional good is “a product, which because of its scarcity, helps to mark people’s relatively higher social position” (Bowe et al., 1994, p. 44). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. International schools are Western private schools (so-called because of the employment of mostly white head-teachers, the use of Western curriculum and pedagogical approaches) both in Western (Brooks & Waters, 2015) and non-Western societies (Ayling, 2015a). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Parents use the terms ‘Africanness’ and ‘Nigerianness’ interchangeably. Both terms are used to refer to the acquisition of cultural values, norms and practices that are perceived by parents as specific to traditional African societies. Crucially, parents believe that the acquisition of these so-called African values and norms, which includes but not limited to, an absolute reverence for one’s culture and parents is integral to the formation of an African/Nigerian identity. So, when parents talk about their children losing their supposed Africanness or Nigerianness, they are essentially referring to a child that has no connection to their African heritage and have lost their African / Nigerian identity.

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