



Cultural Capital, Social Class and Higher Education: How Institutionalised Cultural Capital Shapes Educational Choice in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The article examines the relationship between social class, cultural capital and undergraduate study in Bangladesh with an emphasis on institutionalised cultural capital, which is embedded within the class structure, and its role in determining choice of universities. The data for this study was collected from twenty four students from the University of Dhaka and the BRAC University, Bangladesh, employing observation and qualitative interview methods. The study finds that the medium of instruction (Bengali or English) in school makes a difference in the accumulation of institutionalised cultural capital and institutional habitus among the students of Bangladesh and their choice differ because of these factors. This study finds that students from Bengali medium schools choose mostly public universities, where the medium of instruction is mostly Bengali whereas students from the English medium and English version schools choose renowned universities abroad or renowned private universities in Bangladesh due to different institutionalised cultural capital and institutional habitus.

Keywords: Cultural capital; higher education; institutionalised cultural capital; institutional habitus.

1. Introduction

Pierre Bourdieu, the famous French sociologist, is well known for his writings on cultural capital and social reproduction. Bourdieu (1977) showed how social inequalities reproduced through the educational system in France. It is through the educational system that the 'structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships' (Bourdieu, 1977) are reproduced between classes and cultural capital is reproduced among these classes. Bourdieu (1977) further argues that social inequality is reproduced through the passing of parents' cultural capital to their children in French society. In his writing, Bourdieu (1986) mentions three types of capital: economic, social and cultural capital. However, he Bourdieu (1977) points out the importance of cultural capital as children's linguistic competences, manners, preferences and orientations are developed through acquiring this capital.

Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes three different forms of cultural capital: the embodied, the institutionalised and the objectified cultural capital. The embodied forms of cultural capital are acquired from early childhood and it is taught by parents, other family members or professionals so that children could differentiate the cultural distinctions (Reay et al., 2005). The institutionalised cultural capital is acquired through educational attainment. The objectified cultural capital refers to the ownership of transmitted cultural goods, such as- books, paintings and artefacts (Bourdieu, 1977).

Cultural capital also includes 'habitus' and 'field', two important concepts in Bourdieu's discussion of cultural capital. Bourdieu (1988) posits that cultural capital is mostly acquired through family socialization, and incorporated as dispositions, or habitus. Field is a particular social setting (Silva, 2004), where children act according to their habitus.

There is a close connection between habitus and field and they influence each other. Students with a high volume of cultural capital make a different choice than their counterpart. These opportunities largely come from students' family and institutional backgrounds. In a study of cultural capital and the French educational system, Bourdieu (1977) shows how social class is reproduced through the meritocratic educational systems in French society. In every society, the privileged class have capability to buy costly education as well as having easy access to information regarding the quality of education in different institutions, which furthers their privilege.

In societies characterized by a differentiated social structure and a system of formal education Bourdieu further asserted that these 'advantages' largely stem from the institutionalization of 'criteria of evaluation' in schools- that is standards of assessment- which are favourable to children from a particular class or classes (Bourdieu, 1977). It can be said that children who are raised in affluent families are able to 'buy' quality education. Moreover, they have access to information about different universities and their educational systems. Conversely, children from poorer backgrounds may lack of information about the higher educational systems. All these issues related to stratification can be found in the educational situation currently prevailing in Bangladesh.

The gap between rich and poor has increased steadily over the last four decades in Bangladesh. At present, 5% of the population earns 50% of the country's total income (Barakat, 2003 as cited in: Kabir, 2011). Society is highly stratified and 'a large middle class (at least 33% of total population) influences the overall socioeconomic and political structure of Bangladesh' (Kabir, 2011). A vast majority of the students do not get admission to universities due to financial difficulties; only 4% of the total population get access to higher education (UGC, 2006).

Education in Bangladesh may be divided into six categories. They are - (a) general education up to the secondary level using Bengali as the primary medium of instruction, (b) general education up to the secondary level using English as the primary medium of instruction (under a number of British educational organizations supervised by the British Council), (c) madrasa or Islamic education, (d) vocational or technical education (e) tertiary education in universities and, (f) open-access education under the open-university. The result of these six categories of education co-existing side by side in a small nation with a nearly homogeneous population has been the creation of classes and division of skills which some have viewed as having hindered the socio-economic development of the country (Uddin, 2009). In addition to these six categories, while interviewing, I found a new education system, which is called English version, where the school follows the same curriculum, which is followed by the general education; however, the teachers use English as the primary medium of instruction.

The higher education system in Bangladesh has undergone massive changes in the past 20 years, the most important development being the emergence of privately-run universities. There are 91 universities, 54 private, 34 public and 3 international universities (UGC, 2012) in Bangladesh today compared to only seven in the mid 1980s. The total number of students in the public and private university is about two million (Chowdhury, 2012). It appears that most students belonging to upper and upper-middle class with an English medium school background seek admission in private universities, whereas students with a Bengali medium school background prefer public universities. Though some private universities provide quality education, continuing study in such universities is very expensive. In addition, most private universities use English as their medium of instruction. Conversely, public universities use Bengali as their medium of instruction. The fluency of speaking and writing in English not only ensures getting admission to good universities abroad for higher education but also it helps to get better jobs. This type of variation in higher education could tend to perpetuate further the existing social stratification in Bangladeshi society. The relationship between social stratification and education in Bangladesh has not been explored, being both under-researched and under-theorized. Within this context, this study aims to examine in details the relationship between institutional cultural capital and students' choice of universities.

2. Method

The data for this study was collected from twenty four undergraduate students employing observation and qualitative interview methods. Observation is a data collection tool, which ‘offers an investigator the opportunity to gather live data from naturally occurring social situations’ (Cohen et al., 2007). Observations enable the researcher to gather data on the physical setting, human setting, the interactional setting and the programme setting (Morrison, 1993). The observation method was used particularly to get a sense of students’ social class by observing their speaking, friends and lifestyle within the university campus.

Most of the information for this study was collected through interviews. The qualitative interviewer ‘encourages the subjects to describe as precisely as possible what they experience and feel, and how they act’ (Kvale, 2007). So, the interview method was useful to understand students’ disposition of cultural capital as well as their own perspective regarding choice of universities. As a result, in-depth interview method was chosen to obtain data.

The data for the study was collected from newly admitted undergraduate students of two Universities in Bangladesh. Among 34 public universities, the University of Dhaka was selected as it is the oldest, largest and top ranking university in the country, and the BRAC University was selected among private universities as it is one of the most reputable and leading universities among 54 private universities in Bangladesh. Around 5,000 students are accepted on undergraduate programmes at the University of Dhaka each year and about 2,500 students are accepted on undergraduate programmes at the BRAC University each year. In this study, twenty-four students, eleven from the University of Dhaka and thirteen from the BRAC University were selected purposively by using snowball sampling method.

3. Findings and discussion

Table 1 show that the data for this study has been collected from thirteen female and eleven male students and the mean age of the participants is 19 years. A purposive sampling method was employed to conduct the study because this method was helpful for the researcher to select students from upper-middle, middle and lower class backgrounds. First the researcher contacted three teachers from each university and requested that they select some students. Later, those students were interviewed and the researcher requested them to write down the name and address of one of their friends who they might think belong to their own social class. Beside this, the researcher visited four classes from these universities and explained the research topic to the students and ten students agreed to participate in this study. Moreover, the researcher contacted the admission office of the BRAC University to find students, who received tuition fee waiver and living allowance scholarships for their previous good results and two students, one from working class and another from middle class were interviewed. Finally, twenty-three first year undergraduate students were interviewed from the University of Dhaka and the BRAC University. Beside this, one male student from eight semesters¹ who got full funding from the BRAC University was interviewed as no working class students were admitted to the BRAC University this year.

In this study, cultural capital is defined by parents’ educational qualification and students’ type of high school, reading habits, linguistic competence, participation in different cultural activities and membership in different clubs.

There is no institutional classification for social class in Bangladesh Thus, this study used occupational classifications (based on Erickson and Goldthorpe’s five-class schema, 1993) of parents with income² and educational qualifications of parents to determine students’ social class and to examine the relationship between social class and students’ choice of universities. This study employed Erikson and Goldthorpe’s five-class schema (1993), taking mother’s or father’s occupational class, whichever is the higher, which is based on a simplified version of Erikson’s (1984) dominance schema to determine students’ social class as there are no institutional classifications for social class in Bangladesh. Erikson and Goldthorpe’s (1993) five-class schema refers to five occupational classes, which are white-collar workers, petty-bourgeoisie, farm workers, skilled workers and non-skilled workers. In this study, parents who have a white-collar job and higher educational qualification (MA/Degree) are considered as upper-middle class, parents who are in the petty bourgeoisie class and have higher educational qualification are termed as middle class and parents with farming background and less educational qualification are considered as working class. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect data on the socio-economic and demographic factors of students and their parents.

The data for this study was analysed applying thematic analysis. To analyse data, first interviews were transcribed and some of them were translated because some students spoke in Bengali. The interview questions were based on cultural capital along with some other questions on economic and social capital as this study focused on social background as well. I classified all data following the interview questions and then coded answers into either showing similarities, differences or exceptional answers about a particular theme. In this way certain patterns emerged relating to factors related to students' decision-making process.

3.1 Cultural capital

Cultural capital is 'convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the forms of educational qualifications' (Bourdieu, 1986). For Bourdieu, cultural capital includes 'a broad array of linguistic competences, manners, preferences and orientations' (Reay et al., 2005). The first part of this paper analyses all these forms of cultural capital and then it proceeds to discuss the main three forms of cultural capital.

3.2 Parents' educational qualification

Parents' education, especially mother's educational qualification, is important in children's academic achievement and their decision-making process. All interviewees (96%) except one said that they had learnt the English and Bengali alphabet from their mother before going to school. Almost half of the interviewees (46%) whose mother had an Honours or Masters degree said that their mother helped them in homework till class ten and a few participants received guidance from their mother even after the SSC³ examination. Alam⁴, a 19 year old, middle class student from the BRAC University described in English about his mother's contribution.

My mother used to help me in doing my homework till my SSC examination. She had science background and she had completed her graduation in Zoology from the University of Rajshahi. But she is a housewife. So, it is normal that she forgot most of the things. So, she was perfect to help me from the beginning of my study to class ten. After the SSC exam, she used to help me in writing notes, some other hand notes that I used to prepare. She helped to arrange it properly. She can't help me with my studies at that time. But she looks after everything related to my study, like, tutors and coaching.

This finding confirms Galindo-Rueda et al. (2004) and Thomas and Quinn (2007) findings. They found a significant influence of parental education, especially mother's education on entry to higher education.

3.3 Linguistic competency

This study finds that students from English medium schools speak better English than students from Bengali medium schools. Students from middle class but rural backgrounds and working class students speak in their own dialect even when they speak in standard Bengali. Koushik, a rural middle class student from the DU is a rare case in this regard. He speaks in standard Bengali and the reason lies in his parents' backgrounds, who were high school teachers with graduate degrees. Koushik's family environment is different than other rural working class (like, Rafi and Shoyeb) or middle class students (like, Lina, Mina and Alam). This finding confirms Bourdieu's assertion that linguistic competency is manifested as part of one's habitus (Swartz, 1997).

3.4 Reading habits

Students' reading habits also vary depending on their social class and schooling. Working class students usually had less time to spend on reading books, however, I found they did nonetheless have the habit of reading. Sumon's father had only completed primary school. However, he was interested in reading books and newspapers and he used to listen to the BBC news.

My father is interested in reading books and newspapers. Another interesting thing is that he always listens to BBC Bangla news though he lives in a village. So, I got my reading habit from him and I also read 'Shesher Kobita'⁵ and I still have that book at home. However, we do not have a rich collection of books at home. (Sumon, 20 year old, University of Dhaka)

From the above quotation, it can be inferred that these working class students have lack of cultural capital due to lack of access to cultural resources. They used to live in such rural areas that they even did not get newspaper regularly. However, they tried to acquire some cultural capital through reading different books and newspapers. Against the odds, Sumon and Shoyeb have very good academic backgrounds. Both of them got GPA 5 in their SSC and HSC examinations. This finding contradicts to some other studies (Davies & Guppy, 1997; Sullivan, 2001), where they found a direct relationship between parents' social class and pupils GCSE attainment.

Students from English medium schools have quite different reading habits than students from English version and Bengali medium schools. Students from English medium schools mostly like to read English popular novels. Their thinking and life style is mostly affected by the western life style, which is creating a huge cultural gap among the disposition of cultural capital among Bengali and English medium students. Nivrita, an English medium student kept on talking about her reading habit for almost fifteen minutes and she also explained why she liked those books. She had only read Humayun Ahmed's book among Bengali novels. Nivrita's mother is a reader but her father does not like to read fiction since his graduation from the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology.

I am more of a voracious reader. I even finish fat books in one day and then I ask for more. We basically had this book club. It wasn't officially a book club but few of my close friends who were so much into books that they were the one who introduced reading books to me. Before class eight, I did read but that was because only because I had to, like, if I had a book report, I had to read a book. So that was not *in* my interest. The kind of books I like is I love works of Dan Brown, which is how, you know, infuse with use of religion and modern science, and how symbols and I love the character of, you know, Robert Langdon. And I also read a bit of romantic novels, such as, classics, such as, *Gone with the Wind* and *A Walk to Remember*. I mean every time I read *A Walk to Remember*, I have to cry. It doesn't get old...

On the contrary, students from the Bengali medium schools and those who studied the English version, mostly like to read Bengali novels. Six students were inspired by their family members reading habits. Diba, a student from the BRAC University with Bengali medium school background likes to read Bengali novels, written by Humayun Ahmed and Jafor Iqbal. Another student, Sajol is studying in Physics at the University of Dhaka and likes to read mathematics and science related books. He also likes to read the writings of Jafor Iqbal and Isaac Asimov⁶.

This is how students' reading habits and schooling make a difference between different classes and later on, students' choices of universities differ due to their choice of lifestyle.

3.5 Cultural practices

Bourdieu (1984) finds that all cultural practices (like, museum visits, reading books, preferences in literature, painting or music) are closely linked to 'educational level and social origin' (Bourdieu, 1984). This study that students from upper-middle and middle class backgrounds participated in more cultural activities, such as, music, dance, drama, paintings, debate and sports than working class students. All of the working class students participated only in different kinds of sport; in particular they participated in annual sporting events in school and college. However, they did not learn music, dance, paintings or drama and they never performed in these activities.

There are very few museums and art galleries in Bangladesh and most are located in Dhaka. I asked them whether they visited those places. Eleven students (ten from the BRAC University and one from the University of Dhaka) out of twenty-four interviews visited those places in their childhood because they live in Dhaka. The rest of the students, who had come from outside Dhaka said that they visited those places after getting admission to the university. This makes a difference in the cultural capital of these two groups of students.

Bourdieu (1986) identifies three different forms of cultural capital: the embodied state of cultural capital, the objectified cultural capital and the institutionalised forms of cultural capital. This study examines the relationship between institutionalised cultural capital and students' choice of universities and the next section will discuss the findings on this issue.

3.6 Institutionalised Cultural capital, Field, institutional habitus and students' choice of universities

By institutionalised cultural capital, Bourdieu refers 'particularly to educational institutions which are embodied value systems. By bestowing titles and awards on individuals they appear to be giving expression to the differences between those individuals' (Robbins, 2000). Students usually try to achieve good grades to get good careers in the future, which ultimately help them to carry on their social position.

Another important concept of Bourdieu's schema is 'field'. Bourdieu defined 'field' as a 'network, or configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situations...in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital) where possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field' (Bourdieu, cited in Gewirtz et al., 1995).

Bourdieu developed the concept of 'field' to explain the context in which class dynamics take place (Silva, 2004). A 'field' can be a classroom or university or workplace. Bourdieu (1988) identifies universities as a 'field' where the students battle to gain cultural capital. However, this same idea can be applied to schools, where students fight to gain more cultural capital than their competitors. Later, their decision of going to particular universities might vary due to the volume of cultural capital they accumulate from their school.

Bourdieu argues that the educational system contributes to 'the structure of power relationships and symbolic relationships between classes, by contributing to the reproduction of the structure of distribution of cultural capital among these classes' (Bourdieu, 1977). So, it can be said that schools help the students of dominant classes to perform better than the students of working and lower classes as the students from the dominant classes enter school with 'key social and cultural cues, while working and lower class students must acquire the knowledge and skills to negotiate their educational skill after they enter school' (Lamont & Lareau, 1988).

'Habitus' is another concept of Bourdieu's theory. The idea of transferring cultural capital from parents to child is linked to habitus. Bourdieu (1984) argues that 'it is through the workings of habitus that practice is linked with capital and field' (cited in Reay et al., 2005). Each social class has their habitus which is different than other classes. However, habitus can be transformed by the school experience. Habitus reflects the social class in which it was produced (Bourdieu, 1990). The importance of institutional habitus in the decision-making process will be discussed in the next section.

There are seven types of educational system in Bangladesh. However, this study focuses on three: Bengali medium, English medium and English version, which is actually a division of Bengali medium education, where the medium of instruction is English for the same national curriculum.

Students from English medium schools mostly tried to get admission to universities abroad first and if they failed, they chose the top ranking private universities in Bangladesh. This is also related to their institutional habitus and family environment. In English medium schools, British curriculum along with some parts of national curriculum is followed. They learn about the Western history and their school provides them guidance for applying abroad. When I asked my interviewees, 'Why did you choose University of Dhaka /BRAC University?', their response was follows.

Rima, an upper-middle class student, who had passed the O-level and the A-level examinations from a renowned English medium school, applied to the BRAC University because her parents wanted her to do her under graduate studies in Bangladesh.

I sat for entrance examination to the BRAC University and the North South University and got accepted to both of them. However, the BRAC University is near to my house than the North South University and both universities have almost the same quality. So, I chose the BRAC University. Actually, I wanted to go abroad for higher studies. But my parents did not allow me to go abroad now. So, my mother told me to choose in between these two universities.

Like Rima, Nivrita, Masud and Natasha also wanted to study abroad and they applied to different universities of the United States of America and the United Kingdom. Masud also got acceptance to the McGill University, Canada; however, he did not go there as he thought that it would be a financial burden on his mother.

However, Lisa and Abed studied in English version and they also intended to study abroad. Abed, a middle class student, decided to go to Finland to do his under graduate degree and his father also inspired him a lot. But his mother forbade him to go.

Though students from English medium schools and English version schools mostly take decisions to go abroad right after their O-level examination and try for that, students from Bengali medium schools did not even think about that. This is something which is very much related to social class and institutionalised capital. Students from Bengali medium schools rarely come to know about world renowned universities before they start their under graduate studies. However, they intend to study at the University of Dhaka because they come to know about the University of Dhaka from parents, other family members or school teachers in an early age.

Fifteen interviewees out of seventeen from the Bengali medium schools wanted to attend public universities. Among two other students, Tania tried to go to Malaysia, which is again related to class. She belongs to the upper-middle class and her parents are educated and they have knowledge about different universities. Tania knew about private and public universities from her friends. Another student was Alam, whose parents wanted him to sit for medical admission test. But he would not like to be a doctor and he was finally admitted to the BRAC University. Mumu, a middle class student with Humanities background in the SSC and the HSC examinations, expressed her intention to get into the University of Dhaka.

Students who intend to get in to the University of Dhaka usually get admitted to the university coaching centres due to the highly competitive admission test at the University of Dhaka. The question patterns of the University of Dhaka includes subject specific questions as well as question on Bengali and English grammar and general knowledge (national and international knowledge), which is different than the BRAC University. The question for the admission test at the BRAC University only includes proficiency in English and Bengali grammar and mathematics. For this reason no students from the BRAC University attended the university coaching; however, ten out of eleven interviewees from the University of Dhaka attended university coaching.

Rafi's parents were not well educated; however, his school teachers and cousins inspired him to get good grades in order to get admission to the University of Dhaka. Rafi, Shoyeb and Sumon had almost the same experience. They mostly depended on their school teachers and other tutors rather than parents. Conversely, upper-middle class students were guided by parents, school teachers and private tutors. Their answer reinforces the general argument of Lareau (1997). Lareau found that the working class students found a 'separation of spheres' compared to middle class students, who found an 'interdependence' between the home and school (Lareau, 1997).

From the above discussion, it can be said that institutional habitus and field play an important role in the decision-making process. Six of the interviewees from the BRAC University came from Bengali medium schools. The medium of instruction at the BRAC University is English. Most of the students from Bengali medium schools have to study hard to cope with the new medium. Moreover, students mostly make their friendship circle with those students who have almost similar backgrounds. Tania, an upper-middle class student, who had admitted to the North South University and later, got admitted to the University of Dhaka shared her experience when she was at the North South University.

When I was at the North South University, it was really difficult for me to make friends as most of my classmates were from English medium background. Their culture was kind of different than mine. On the other hand, I also faced difficulties when I first started my class at the Dhaka University because many of classmates, especially boys, come from rural areas. So, they feel shy to talk to me. However, they are OK now and I have many friends now.

Tania's case is an interesting example of habitus and field. The difficulties she faced with her previous classmates due to her different level of cultural capital, some of her present classmates faced the same problems when they first met her. This is perhaps one of the reasons for which the University of Dhaka was the first choice for six of the Bengali medium students from the BRAC University.

Finally, it can be concluded that this study finds field, institutional habitus and institutionalised cultural capital play important role in making the choice of university. This finding partially supports Mullen's

(2010) findings. Mullen (2010) found family backgrounds and schooling plays important role on students' choice of universities in the United States of America. Though previous studies (Reay et al., 2005; Noble & Davies, 2009) found relationships between cultural capital and university choice, this study finds institutional habitus, field and institutionalised cultural capital has a greater effect than other forms of capital in the choice of university within the context of Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Due to expansion of the higher education systems with the introduction of private universities over the last two decades, participation in higher education in Bangladesh has increased. Before this expansion, many aspiring students did not get admission to public universities due to the limited number of places; they ended up at public or private colleges instead. Today, however, many students from different social backgrounds now expect to attain a university degree. However, the choice of university depends heavily on students' institutionalised cultural capital, field and institutional habitus. Privileged parents sent their children to English medium schools, where the tuition fees were very high in comparison to the Bengali medium schools so that their children could get the best education. These students had private tutors and they attended private coaching to get good grades and attended coaching for university admission to get in the University of Dhaka. The students of the BRAC University did not attend any coaching as the questions for the admission tests only focuses on proficiency in English and Mathematics. Students from the more privileged classes did not only get the best education, their parents admitted them to different cultural institutions so that they can accumulate cultural knowledge as well.

Conversely, students from working class and rural background did not get this advantage. Most of their parents are not well educated. As a result, working class parents could not help their children in their studies and they did not have the life experience to guide them to choose universities. Working class students lack of cultural knowledge due to their family backgrounds. They usually tried to get in to public universities particularly the University of Dhaka, which they knew from their teachers and relatives as the best university in Bangladesh. They never imagined getting admission to private universities due to financial reasons. Reay et al. (2005) in their study in the United Kingdom and Mullen (2010) in her study in the United States of America found similar results. A major difference in Bangladesh is that the University of Dhaka is a public university, which is still known as the top ranking university.

Another trend is that upper-middle class students with English medium school backgrounds are more likely to choose universities abroad first and they often apply to those universities. If they did not get admission to those universities, they chose the BRAC University or other renowned private universities to continue their education. One of the reasons behind their choice is that the medium of instruction is English in most of the renowned private universities whereas medium of instruction is Bengali in public universities. Moreover, these students follow a different syllabus which has no similarities with the national curriculum.

This study employs Bourdieu's theoretical framework to explore the mechanisms behind the relationship between institutional cultural capital and students' choice of universities. Though Bourdieu's theory suggests that students' with a high volume of cultural capital tend to choose top ranking universities, this study finds that sometimes working class students may also choose top ranking universities. Bourdieu ignores the idea that students from working class background may try to accumulate cultural capital by utilising institutional habitus. This study finds that working class students develop their reading habits guided by their teachers or extended family members. In the context of Bangladesh, extended family members and high school teachers sometimes play an important role in the decision making process. Another reason for which working class and middle class students choose the University of Dhaka is lower tuition fees. Reay et al. (2005) and Mullen (2010) found that working class students' did not choose top ranking universities because of high tuition fees. However, public universities are a less expensive option in Bangladesh.

This study finds that cultural capital and social class are important factors in the decision-making process. However, the most effective factor is institutional cultural capital and institutional habitus in the context of Bangladeshi educational system. Due to institutional cultural capital and institutional habitus Bengali medium students choose mostly public universities whereas English medium students choose world ranking universities or renowned private universities in Bangladesh as the medium of instruction is English

in those universities. The University of Dhaka was the first choice for all the middle class interviewees studying humanities with Bengali medium schools backgrounds. There are also cultural differences among these two groups of students. Institutional habitus and field play an important role in their choice. English medium students feel more comfortable at the BRAC University as they can speak in English with classmates and teachers whereas Bengali medium students prefer to choose the University of Dhaka as their classmates and teachers speak in Bengali. Students from English version schools also chose the BRAC University due to their institutional habitus. This trend confirms ‘when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself ‘as a fish in water’, it does not feel the weight of the water and takes the world about itself as taken for granted’ (Wacquant, 1989). Reay et al. (2005) also found that institutional and family habitus play an important role in the decision making process.

Though Bourdieu’s (1990) ‘habitus’ is embedded and rarely transferable from one social class to another, this study finds that institutional cultural capital and institutional habitus rather than family habitus might help the working class students to get good grades and choose top ranking universities. Bourdieu (1990) points out that ‘the operation of the habitus regularly excludes certain practices: those which are unfamiliar to the cultural groupings to which the individual belongs’ (cited in Reay et al., 2005). According to this statement, working class students are not supposed to study in the top ranking universities as most of their peers drop out in primary school. However, this study finds that sometimes working class students with the assistance of their school teachers study hard, get good grades and then choose the top ranking universities. This is how working class students may accumulate institutional cultural capital utilising institutional habitus.

To conclude, it can be said that students’ choice of universities in Bangladesh vary due to the differences in schooling, especially students from different medium (Bengali/English) of schools possess different types of institutionalised cultural capital and institutional habitus, which influence their choice of higher educational institutions. The government of Bangladesh should notice this problem and change the educational policy to ensure that everyone will get the same quality of education.

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End notes

¹ Students usually have to complete 12 semesters to get undergraduate degree. There are three semesters in a year. Eight semester means the student is studying in third year.

² Income varies depending on the official position within the same occupation.

³ SSC is an acronym for the Secondary School Certificate examination which is equivalent to the O-level examination.

⁴ Pseudonyms have been used for names of all interviewees to maintain participants' privacy and anonymity.

⁵ 'Shesher Kobita' is a famous Bengali classical novel written by Rabindranath Tagore.

⁶ Isaac Asimov is an American science fiction writer.

Table(s)

Table 1: Characteristics of undergraduate students

Characteristics	University of Dhaka	BRAC University
Gender		
Male	6	5
Female	5	8
Mean age	19	19
Subject of study		
Computer Science and Engineering (CSE)	1	
Biochemistry and Molecular Biology	2	
Electrical and Electronic Engineering (EEE)		1
Physics	1	
Business Administration		5
Economics		5
English		1
Architecture		1
Sociology	4	
History	2	
Peace and Conflict Studies	1	