

Bridging Economic Inequality in India
through Higher Education:
A Study on Rural, First Generation Learners

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Abstract

One of the biggest challenges that India is facing is growing economic inequality. This inequality greatly impacts the social welfare of the nation. There is a pressing need for India to address this issue. Widening participation in higher education has the potential to open up new opportunities, reduce income inequality and promote economic growth and social welfare. Widening participation has resulted in many first generation learners entering the higher education institutions. Gainful employment for these first generation learners is one potential way for bridging economic inequality. Many researchers have opined that supplementary measures need to be taken to help the first generation learners to compete with their peers and get gainfully employed.

A private, self-financed, philanthropic engineering school in Chennai, a city in India, had designed a special supplementary curriculum to help first generation learners, from rural villages belonging to the economically lower strata, to overcome the cultural and social barriers and get gainfully employed. The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experiences of a cohort of rural, first generation learners, who had undergone this curriculum and to comprehend their perception of the effectiveness of this specially designed supplementary curriculum in enhancing their employability skills and economic status and also the impact it had on their family's economic status. The research was conducted on a

cohort of 13 rural, first generation learners, who had completed their undergraduate engineering program at this institution in 2012. Seven of the participants were male and six were female. All of them had undergone the special supplementary curriculum designed by this institution, which included an orientation course, mentorship, additional coaching classes for academics, English communications skills training, participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities and job-oriented placement training. Semi-structured interviews were held to collect data. A qualitative phenomenological approach was taken for this study, since the requirement was to understand in-depth the challenges faced by the rural, first generation learners from their perspective and get a deep insight into how they overcame them. The themes were extracted from the participants' interviews and were analyzed. The participants of this study perceived that higher education alone may not have been sufficient for them to overcome the challenges in getting meaningful employment. Their lived experiences suggest that the specially designed curriculum was necessary to help them to overcome the cultural and social barriers and to equip them with the necessary employability skills to enter the workforce. Their economic status improved considerably. It was interesting to note that all of them had contributed towards uplifting the economic status of their family as well. Their lived experiences indicated that targeted initiatives in higher education institutions that assisted in equipping rural first generation learners from

underprivileged backgrounds with the necessary skills and traits needed for employment could be considered as an effective tool to fight economic inequality. The study concludes with recommendations to the education policy makers and higher education institutions. More research into the scalability of the proposed supplementary curriculum to a larger mass of diverse first generation learners is recommended.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

I would like to start with a quote from Nelson Mandela, which accentuates the crux of my thesis.

'Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation. It is what we make out of what we have, not what we are given, that separates one person from another.'

Background

India takes pride in being one of the fastest growing economies in the world. But one of the biggest challenges that India is facing today is growing economic inequality. The Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook (2014, 2018), highlights the growing economic inequality in India based on the increasing value of the Gini coefficient of India as calculated by the OECD. In addition to this data, in 2013, 55 Indians are featured in the Forbes list of billionaires. The estimated net worth of the richest 10 Indians is approximately 5.5% of the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of India. India ranks sixth globally in terms of the ultra-rich population. It is a paradox that in stark contrast, every third poor person in the world is an Indian. In 2018, among the 119 countries listed in the annual Global Hunger Index, India

ranked 103. This has been categorized as serious and shows a disturbing level of hunger in India, which again stands proof to the alarming level of people belonging to the lower economic strata. While United States dominates the world's rich and China the world's middle class, India leads the world's poorest 10% of the global population (Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook, 2018).

All the above factors clearly emphasize that there is a pressing need for India to address the problem of rising inequality. India must take corrective actions to ensure that the growth process is broad-based and create better income prospects for people from the lower economic strata.

Enormous literature is available highlighting the role of education in reducing inequalities and promoting economic growth (Tilak, 2015; Barro, 2013). Firstly, we have to understand the higher education scenario in India and then explore what effective complementary efforts can be taken to reduce inequality.

There is a huge transformation in the higher education system in India due to the demographic and economic changes. India will be the youngest country in the world by 2020. India has a population of 1.3 billion, out of which approximately 830 million belong to the working age group, which is defined as 15 to 59 years (The India Skills Report, 2019). If this demographic advantage is properly harnessed then by 2025 India will contribute to 25% of the world's total workforce (Chandrasekaran, 2014).

For ensuring that this demographic advantage is converted into a demographic dividend and not into a demographic disaster, India has to meet the challenges in creating individuals, equipped with the necessary skills to enter the global workforce.

Widening participation in higher education is considered as one of the defined paths for achieving the goal of bridging economic inequality in India. The tremendous pressure to expand the higher education system in India has resulted in a phenomenal growth in the number of students enrolled in higher education institutions. This has given rise to a huge number of first-generation learners entering higher education institutions.

There are various definitions for first-generation learners. U.S. Department of Education (2010) has defined first-generation learners as those students whose parents did not enroll in post-secondary education. In this study, first-generation learners are defined as those students who are the first in their entire family, across generations, to get admitted in a higher education institution. Their parents would not have attended any formal higher education at all (Ghosh, 2014). At the maximum they would have studied up to higher secondary school level. They will be invariably from the lower economic strata (Singh, 1989). With this cultural and social background, entering a higher education institution itself will be a traumatic experience for the first-generation learners, especially if they are from rural areas. Within their four years of undergraduate study they have to not only

handle the challenges of entering a new environment but also cope up with the academic load and acquire the skill sets expected by the labour market (Hirudayaraj, 2011). What is really important is to investigate whether providing access to higher education to these first-generation learners will result in enhancing the employability and earnings potential of these students. Higher education leading to meaningful employment is necessary for economic upliftment.

In India, 66% of the population live in villages as per World Bank (2018) statistics based on the United Nations Population Division's World Urbanization Prospects study. So India is predominantly a rural country. The inclusive development of India is dependent on the economic growth of the rural community (Chand et al., 2017). Based on the 55th round of National Sample Survey, Hasan and Mehta (2006) have reported that among the total students enrolled in higher education, 63% were from urban areas and only 37% were from rural areas.

Many researchers like Tilak (2015), Thorat and Khan (2018), Deshpande (2018) and Kundu (2018) have studied the various dimensions of inequalities in higher education in India. The different dimensions examined include gender, caste, religion, region and economic status. All these studies have concluded that highest inequalities are between the rich and the poor. Another disturbing finding is that even with the expansion in the higher education sector in India, the inequalities between the rich and

the poor are increasing. Therefore, to bridge economic inequality, it will be more meaningful if we start with the people from the rural areas, belonging to the lower economic strata.

While providing access to higher education is an important first step, there is also a need to explore and understand the experiences and the challenges first generation learners face in higher education and in employment - how they acquire cultural, social and economic capitals, and ultimately transform their standing in society. Such understanding and subsequent actions will further aid in the efforts to reduce inequality in India.

Practice based Research

The private self-financed engineering college in India, in which I work as President since its inception in 1996, is a philanthropic venture, focused on providing inclusive and equitable education. For this study, I will focus on the undergraduate engineering programs in our college, in which around 3600 students are enrolled. Currently, approximately 30% of these students are first-generation learners. In particular, in 2008, in order to provide inclusive education, we started the Rural Scholarship Scheme. Under this scheme, every year, we admit 20 first-generation learners from rural government schools in the state of Tamil Nadu in India into our engineering undergraduate programs and provide financial support to cover their entire cost of education, boarding and lodging for their four years of study. The

parents of these first-generation learners were typically daily wage labourers - farming or non-farming. The average daily wage of these workers was around USD 2, as per the Wage Rates in Rural India 2013-14 report. I have extensively interacted with them and I was able to understand the challenges they faced in competing with their non-first-generation peers. It was evident that they 'did not enter the university on equal terms' (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p. 56).

In India, the majority of the first-generation learners came from rural villages, where the medium of education in the schools is in Tamil, the regional language. Their examinations were also conducted in Tamil. Their lack of proficiency in English was a tremendous disadvantage for them (Malhoit, 2005). In our institution, the medium of instruction is English. This was a big hurdle for first-generation learners, since they found it very difficult to comprehend the instructions given. Competing with their non-first-generation peers, who would have already mastered English in their twelve years of school education, was an added challenge. During the recruitment drives, when companies come to our campus to recruit students, the first generation learners struggled to get employment. I interacted with them in the regional language and understood the difficulties they faced in overcoming the cultural and social barriers, which led to loss of self-esteem and decline in their self-confidence. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002, p. 45) recommended that rather than focusing only on the cultural-via-education

way, 'complementary efforts to reduce inequality of conditions and especially class inequalities in economic security, stability and prospects, will also be required'. It was evident that the first-generation learners needed additional, specially designed support to compete with their peers and get meaningfully employed.

For this purpose, a team headed by me designed a special curriculum, which supplemented their four-year undergraduate degree program, to build the skills and attitude required for employment for these first generation learners. We created the curriculum based on our extensive interaction with the first generation learners and following our own intuition and sense of what would help them. It started with a three-week long orientation course followed by targeted counseling and mentorship, special classes for English and academics, placement orientation classes, etc. The objective was to facilitate the successful transition of the first-generation learners from higher education institution into the labour market, (Owens et al., 2010).

Though every component of the supplementary curriculum had been crafted with a lot of sincere efforts, we had not done any research on the perception of those who had undergone this curriculum on the effectiveness of the various modules of the curriculum in enhancing the skills and attitude required for employment, and its impact on their cultural, social and economic status. In terms of practitioner research, I felt that I should have

an insight into how each of the modules of the supplementary curriculum impacted the first generation learners, from their perspective.

Till date the colleges in India have rarely designed any supplementary curriculum specially meant for assisting first generation learners to get meaningful employment. In general, the first generation learners in most of the colleges were given some sporadic support and then left to fend for themselves. My experiences with rural, first generation learners clearly revealed how insufficient this would be for a majority of these students. It would be of great benefit to rural, first generation learners if we were able to provide a template for a supplementary curriculum for them, which might be perceived to be effect by a cohort of rural, first generation learners. This is what motivated me to research about the effectiveness and impact of our specially designed curriculum from the perspective of the rural, first generation learners.

Purpose of the Study

The primary purpose of my study was to understand and document the experiences of a cohort of rural, first generation learners, who had undergone the supplementary curriculum, specially designed for enhancing their skills and attitude needed for employment. This study aimed to comprehend whether the participants perceived this specially designed supplementary curriculum helped in enhancing the outcome of higher education in terms of their employability skills and economic status.

Moreover, most of the research on first-generation learners mainly focused on enhancing their access to higher education and improving their academic achievements. The socio-economic impact of higher education on the lives of the first-generation learners and their families had been to a large extent neglected (Hirudayaraj, 2011). There is very limited empirical research done on widening participation and employability skills. This is the gap that the primary and secondary research questions of my study aimed to address.

The sample size of my research is too small for formulating a national policy. But I have made some humble recommendations. I hope that this study will draw attention to the perception of a cohort of first generation learners on not only the benefits of a specially designed supplementary curriculum but also the requirement of such a curriculum for helping them to overcome their cultural and social barriers and get gainfully employed. Upliftment in the economic status of the first generation learners is one step towards paving the way for bridging economic inequality in India.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following primary and secondary research questions.

Primary research question:

How effective did a cohort of rural, first generation learners find a specially designed supplementary curriculum in enhancing the outcome of higher education in terms of their employability skills and economic status?

Secondary research questions:

1. Based on Bourdieu's (1986) definition of cultural, social and economic capitals, what capitals did the rural, first generation learners bring upon admission to our institution?
2. What is the relevance of Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) with regards to the originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership of the rural, first generation learners, who had undergone the specially designed curriculum of our institution?
3. How did first-generation graduates' originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership differ at personal and family level?
4. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in navigating the cultural barriers?
5. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in acquiring the skills and attitude necessary for employment, such as proficiency in English, self-confidence and the ability to connect and cooperate with others?
6. What challenges did the rural, first generation learners at our institution experience in higher education and in employment?

Knowledge Generated

India has to overcome the challenge of growing economic inequality to ensure economic progress. There is a lot of theory stating that education is an effective route to reduce this gap and promote economic growth (Hanushek, 2013; Corak, 2013). My research empirically supports these theories based on the lived experiences of a cohort of first generation learners. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002) posit that in order to break the cycle of reproduction of cultural and social capitals (Bourdieu, 1986), which leads to reproduction of economic capital, complementary interventions will be required. Wacquant (1993, p. 14) has recommended that, 'an invitation to think with Bourdieu is of necessity an invitation to think beyond Bourdieu, and against him whenever required.' I have followed Wacquant's suggestion and tried to understand the lived experiences of rural, first generation learners, who stand as exceptions to Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproductions.

The first generation learners have less cultural, economic and social capitals when compared to their non-first generation peers. This suggests that unless they are aided by effective interventions, they might fall prey to the cycle of reproduction of economic capital, which in turn will abet economic inequality. My study provides evidence of the lived experiences of a cohort of rural, first generation learners, who had undergone a

supplementary curriculum designed for helping first generation learners from underprivileged economic background to considerably enhance their economic capital, thus standing exceptions to the cycle of reproduction. One of the important outcomes of my research is that based on the lived experiences of a cohort of rural, first generation learners, it provides guidance for interventions that could be effective in enhancing the outcome of higher education and improving the economic status of the first generation learners at both the individual level and for their family units. Such initiatives might help to uplift the individuals and their families from the lower social economic group and help bridge economic inequality.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis has been divided into 7 chapters. The first chapter is the Introduction. I have given below an overview of the other 6 chapters.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

I have first surveyed the concept of widening participation in higher education in the global arena. Then I have reviewed the magnitude of the issue of economic inequality in the Indian context and analyzed the literature pertaining to the role of widening participation in higher education for addressing this issue. Widening participation will lead to many first generation learners entering higher education institutions. I have discussed the various theories postulated by researchers on the challenges faced by

first generation learners in higher education institutions. For the upliftment of these first generation learners, education leading to gainful employment is a necessity. I have examined the literature about the skills and attitude necessary to get gainfully employment.

Chapter 3 – Theoretical Framework

The concepts of cultural, social and economic capitals in general and with respect to the first generation learners in particular have been explored. Bourdieu's (1986) definition of cultural, social and economic capitals have been primarily used for this analysis. I have also explained that a qualitative phenomenological approach along with the cultural capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986) and Erikson & Goldthorpe (2002); the social capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) and the economic capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986) served as the theoretical scaffolding for my research.

Chapter 4 – Methodology

I have stated the research questions which framed my study, discussed the design of the research and justified why a qualitative phenomenological approach was best suited for my purpose. Next, I detailed the participants' selection, the criteria for selection and how the selected participants were invited to participate in my research. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. I explained how I used Braun

and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework for conducting the data analysis, underpinned by phenomenology. I elaborated on the six steps followed for analysing the data. This included generating codes from the semi-structured interviews, clubbing them into themes and then arriving at the final themes. Then I explained how this research was ethically conducted and the validations it satisfied. I also justified how this study was relevant to my professional practice.

Chapter 5 – Results

The results from the semi-structured interviews held with the 13 participants of this study are reported. These results provided an insight into the cultural, social and economic capitals of the participants before they joined our institution, the hurdles they faced in the pursuing and completing higher education, the current cultural, social and economic capitals of not only the participants but also their families.

Chapter 6 – Discussions

I first put forth the discussions, based on the results generated from the interviews with the participants of my study, which provided the answers for each one of my six secondary research questions. The consolidation of the discussions on the six secondary research questions provided the answer for my overarching primary research question.

Chapter 7 – Conclusions

This provides the summary of my study. The implications of the inferences of this study was explored. I have brought out the uniqueness of my empirical study in comparison with three other empirical studies, which were based on enhancing the employability skills of first generation learners. The sample for this study was small and cannot be generalized. I have provided recommendations to other higher education institutions and policy makers. I have wrapped up this chapter with declarations on the limitations of my study and then recommendations for further research.

Definition of Terms

First-generation learners - First-generation learners are defined as those students who are the first in their entire family, across generations, to get admitted in a higher education institution.

First-generation graduate participants of my study –They came from families, where the parents are agricultural or non-agricultural labourers. The parents of these first-generation learners were typically farming daily wage labourers or weaving daily wage labourers. The average daily wage of these workers was around USD 2, as per the Wage Rates in Rural India 2013-14 report. All of them possessed the certificate provided by the State Government declaring that they were first generation learners.

Employability – The ability to gain employment (Hogan et al., 2013).

Skills and attitude necessary for employment – The skills and attitude necessary for employment that this study will address are English communication skills, cooperating and connecting skills and self-confidence.

English communication skills – This refers to the English communication skills in listening, reading, writing and speaking. It is important that the candidate should have the ability to listen and comprehend English. He/she should explain or write his/her ideas and thoughts in a concise and clear manner in English, which is the business language. The candidate should be able to read and comprehend written materials.

Cooperate and connect– This is characterized by the ability of the individual to interact and work efficiently with his/her peers and seniors. This characteristic is very vital for effectively working in a team (Bloom and Kitagawa, 1999).

Self-confidence – Self-confidence is characterized by self-esteem and self-efficacy. Self-esteem can be defined as the confidence that we can cope up with the happenings in our lives. Self-efficacy is the confidence in our capabilities to mastering skills in order to achieving our goals (Bandura, 1994).

Economic inequality – Economic inequality in this study refers to the inequality in the income and earnings.

Measurement of Social Capital of an Individual – There are various definitions for social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Though social capital is distinct from economic capital, they are inseparable (Bourdieu, 1986). While economic capital can be measured, social capital cannot be measured. There are various aspects in the conceptualization of social capital. For this study I would like to base the measurement of social capital on an individual's social network – the number and quality of social relationships.

Twelfth Standard – The twelfth standard is the final year of secondary school in India. In many countries it is referred to as the twelfth grade.

Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in higher education – The gross enrolment ratio in higher education is the ratio of the students enrolled in higher education to the total population in the 18 to 23 age group.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

While considering the factors that would help to bridge economic inequality in India, it is necessary to understand the extent of this issue in the Indian context, explore a suitable option for addressing this problem and analyze the challenges in implementation. In this literature review first I would like to cover the concept of widening participation in higher education from a global perspective. Then I will address three major areas in the Indian context, namely, economic inequality, the role of education and the higher education scenario. Bridging economic inequality will require upliftment of people from the lower economic strata. Then I will deliberate on the various theories on the challenges faced by first generation learners, who are the participants of my study, who enter higher education institutions. Lastly I will discuss about the skills and trait necessary for employment.

Widening Participation in Higher Education

Widening participation in higher education has been considered as one of the strategic priorities of different countries. It is considered essential for ensuring that higher education is more inclusive and equitable. Hence widening participation in higher education has emerged as a vital policy

concern in a number of countries. While widening participation is an important issue, it is also a very complex one.

Efforts and initiatives taken to widen participation in higher education differs greatly in various countries in the world. Salmi (2018) has done an interesting analysis on the widening participation policies in 71 countries in his report on higher education equity policies across the globe. The report classifies the countries into four categories, namely, advanced, established, developing and emerging, based on how effectively that country is addressing the access challenges. 'Advanced' countries are those who have formulated and implemented a comprehensive strategy for equity. Only six countries – Australia, Cuba, England, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland – have been categorized as 'advanced'. 'Established' countries are those which have formulated an access strategy and are in the process of implementing the policies. 23 countries, including Spain, US, France, Canada and India, have been listed in the 'established' category. 'Developing' countries are those which have established the foundations for an equity strategy, but have not devised policies to implement. The largest number of countries belong to this group. The 33 countries under this classification includes Japan, Kenya, Russia, Indonesia and Argentina. The 'emerging' countries are those which have formulated broad goals but have not done much beyond that. Only nine countries, including Laos, Nicaragua, Egypt, Sierra Leone and Haiti, belong to the 'emerging' category.

Salmi (2018) has graded the countries based on the range of policies formulated and the various initiatives planned to implement these policies. His study does not examine the degree of success or the impact of the equity policies in the respective countries surveyed. He has however mentioned that in many countries the equity policies were very traditional with a lot of importance given to providing financial aid. He further observes that the emphasis is largely on removing the access barriers. Promoting interventions to increase the probabilities of success of the students from disadvantaged backgrounds has to a large extent been neglected.

I will now examine the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education in various countries. As per the latest data compiled by UNESCO, the average GER across the world is 35.48%. Macao topped the list with 90.66% and Niger is the lowest with 4.41%.

As per a study conducted by Planning Commission-FICCI-Ernst & Young (2012), with respect to student enrolment, India's higher education system is the second largest in the world, next to China. The GER in China increased from 5% in 1996 to 43.4% in 2015 to 50.6% in 2018. It is interesting to note that the GER in India increased from 0.7% in 1950 to 1.4% in 1960 to 6% in 1990 to 12% in 2007. It further increased to 24.5% in 2015 to 26.3% in 2018 (AISHE, 2018). Though India had an advantage in terms of GER in 1990, we could not match China's increase in GER.

The key objectives of widening participation in higher education are social justice, economic progress and pragmatism (Osborne, 2003). Widening participation in higher education would serve the above purpose only if it broadens the diversity in higher education. It will not be beneficial if it implies solely an increase in the number of entrants in higher education. UNESCO had done a study in 2016 on persons in the 25 to 29 age range in 76 low-income countries. Their findings show that only 1% of the poorest in this age group had completed at least four years of higher studies, compared to 20% of the richest. This trend of increase in the inequalities in the enrolment ratios between the poorest and richest quintile in India has been highlighted by Tilak (2015). He has stated that while the enrolment ratio declined among the poorest quintile between 1993-1994 and 2004-2005, it increased at a disproportionate rate in the case of the richest quintile in the same time period. During this period, in the case of the poorest quintile the ratio declined from 2% to 1.8%, while for the richest quintile it increased from 26% to 37%. Tilak (2015) has further conducted an analysis using National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) surveys conducted in 2007-08 and 2013-14. The analysis indicated that the inequality in access to higher education had increased significantly by the economic status during this period.

Indian Context

1. Economic Inequality

Economic capital can be defined as the capacity of a person to exchange resources for monetary or economic benefit. Disparity in the economic capital of individuals is what leads to economic inequality. One of the major issues impeding India's progress is growing economic inequality. Many studies stand proof for the growing economic inequality. The Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook (2014), highlights the enormous difference in the wealth share held by the richest 10 % and the poorest 10% in India. While United States dominates the world's rich and China the world's middle class, India leads the world's poorest 10% of the population in the world.

The Human Development Report 2019 has published an economic inequality survey based on the share of income of the top 10% of a country's population. The European Union is the most equal region with the top 10% holding 34% share of income. The share of income of the top 10% in US was 47%, China 41% and India 55%. Inequality in the Middle East, Brazil and Sub-Saharan Africa remained extremely high with the income share of the top 10% being around 55% to 60%.

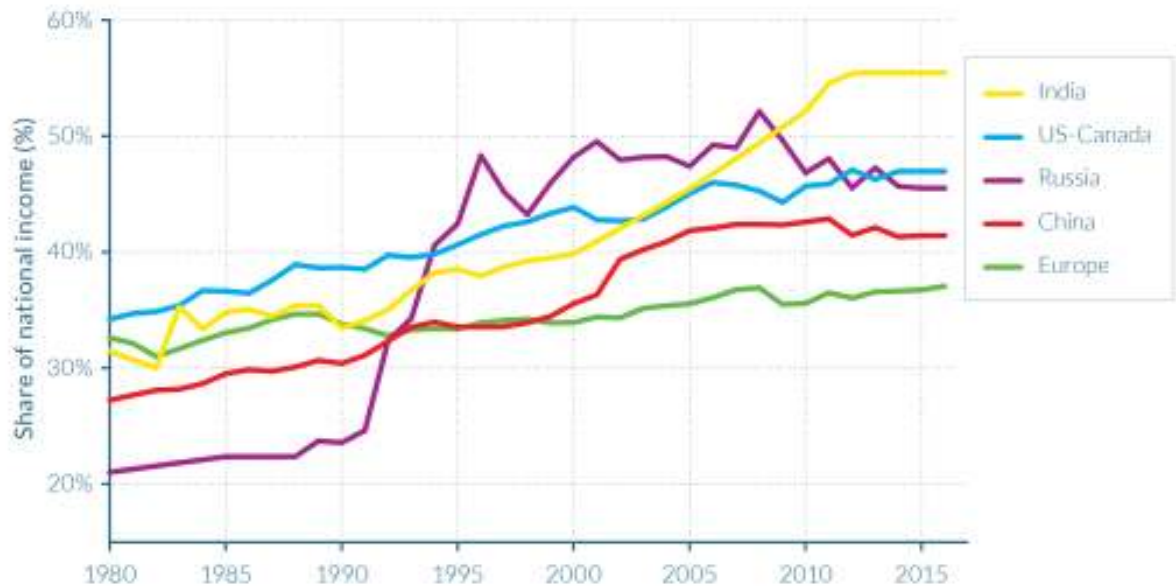


Figure 1 – Income Share of Top 10% of a Country’s Population

Source: Taken from *World Inequality Report 2018*

The Human Development Report 2019 has raised concern over the rise in economic inequality in India as it had become one of the most unequal places over the last few decades when compared to countries like Europe, China, Russia and US as shown in Figure 1. The report further highlights that the rise of inequality in India over the last two decades has been the second highest in the world, next to Russia. It is interesting to note that the rise in Russia, which was one of the most equal countries in 1990, was extreme and it became one of the most unequal countries by 1995.

Credit Suisse’s Global Wealth Databook (2018) reconfirms the lopsided growth in India. The Databook defines the ultra-rich population as those with wealth exceeding USD 50 million and the base-tier as those with wealth less than USD 10000. India ranks sixth globally in terms of the ultra-rich

population. In contrast 90% of India's population belongs to the base-tier. India is one of the highest contributors to the population with base-tier wealth. In comparison, a third of China and only 28.4 per cent of the US' adult population belong to this segment.

Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook (2014, p. 99) explicitly states, 'Residents of India remain heavily concentrated in the bottom half of the distribution. However, the country's high wealth inequality and immense population mean that India also has a significant number of members in the top wealth echelons'

The Gini coefficient is a parameter to measure the inequality in income of the residents of a country. The coefficient ranges from zero to one, with zero representing perfect equality and one showing perfect inequality. The higher is the Gini coefficient, more is the gap between the rich and the poor in a country. According to the OECD, between 1993 and 2008, India's Gini coefficient increased from 0.32 to 0.38. This clearly portrays that despite India being considered as one of the fastest growing economies in the world, there is a sharp rise in the inequality in income across the years.

The negative effects of inequality on the economic growth of a country have been highlighted by many empirical studies (Berg et al., 2012, Dabla-Norris et al., 2015; Ostry et al., 2014). Berg and Ostry (2011) postulate that a 10 percentile decrease in inequality increases the length of a growth spell by 50%. Dabla-Norris et al. (2015) hypothesize that increase in the income

share of the top quintile is associated with a decline in the GDP growth over the medium term, while an increase in the share of income of the bottom quintile results in higher growth.

2. Role of Education

All the above factors clearly emphasize that there is a pressing need for India to address the problem of growing inequality. India has to devise strategies to uplift the poor. Education has always been considered a means for providing upward social and economic mobility. Enormous literature is available highlighting the role of education in reducing inequalities and promoting economic growth (Tilak, 1994). Carnoy (1993) and Cain et al. (2014) emphasize that education is the most sustainable and effective measure to reduce inequalities in the society.

Tilak (2015) particularly emphasizes that higher education is an essential engine for equitable economic and social progress. Tilak (2015, p. 187) states that 'To break the cyclical chain of inequalities—where inequalities in education contribute to inequalities in labour market information, which lead to inequalities in employment, which further cause inequalities in earnings that result in sociopolitical inequalities, which in turn cause inequalities in participation in education—education is considered as a very effective strategy.' This chain of inequalities is depicted in Figure 2. We can infer that education, in particular higher education, plays a vital role in addressing inequality.

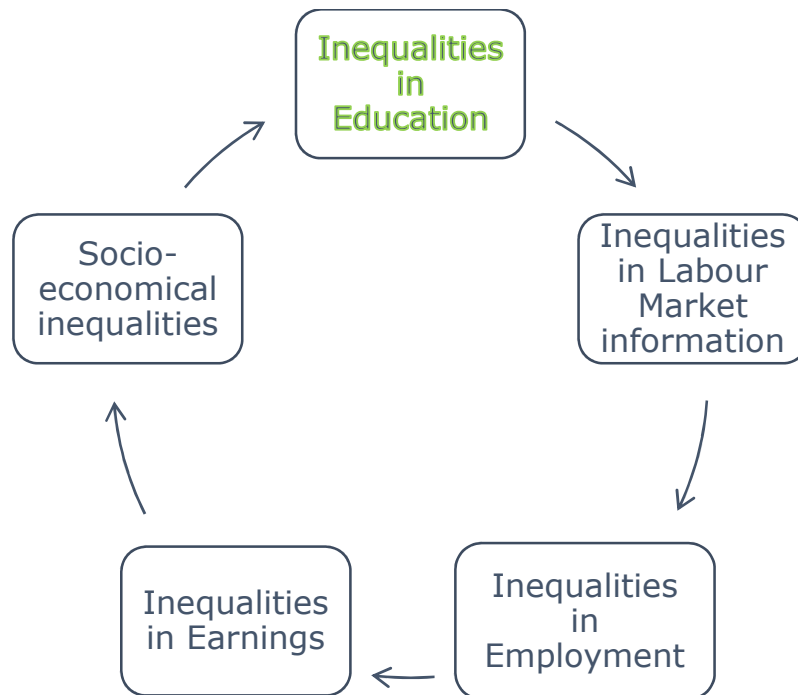


Figure 2 – Chain of Inequalities

Source – Authors own work

On the other hand, this alarming problem of rising inequality in income in India seems to support of Bourdieu’s social reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Bourdieu states that education plays a vital role in abetting and aiding the reproduction of social inequality, which in turn results in economic inequality. He argues that the cultural and social capital that the parents endow their children with creates inequalities in the educational and occupational attainment of the children. What India currently needs is social transformation and not social reproduction. India must take further actions to ensure that the growth process is broad-based and create better income prospects for people from the lower economic strata. Higher education for these people, many of whom will be first-

generation learners, is one of the means for achieving this. But the first-generation learners face many challenges in successfully completing higher education and being effectively employed. Furthermore, higher education without meaningful employment will once again defeat the purpose. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002, p. 45) state, 'Educational expansion and reform alone should not, therefore, be expected to serve as very effective instruments of public policy at creating greater equality of opportunities'. Rather than focusing only on the cultural-via-education way, 'complementary efforts to reduce inequality of conditions and especially class inequalities in economic security, stability and prospects, will also be required'.

3. Higher Education

I will first consider the higher education scenario in India and then explore what effective complementary efforts can be taken to reduce the inequality. The higher education system in India is undergoing unprecedented transformation, which is mainly driven by the demographic and economic changes. India has a population of 1.3 billion, out of which approximately 0.8 billion belong to the working age group, which is defined as 15 to 59 years (The India Skills Report, 2014). By 2020, India will be the world's youngest country and 64% of its population will be in the working age group (Prakash, 2013). According to the National Skill Development Corporation India and the United Nations Development Programme India, if this demographic advantage is properly harnessed then by 2025 India will

contribute 25% of the world's total workforce (Chandrasekaran, 2014). India has to meet the challenges in creating individuals, equipped with the necessary skills to enter the world's workforce. Widening participation in higher education could be considered as one of the first steps towards achieving this goal.

Widening participation in higher education is essential for bridging economic inequality of the country. Worldwide every government is doling out policies for fostering wider participation in higher education. They consider providing access to higher education to large sections of society, thus increasing the participation of first-generation learners in higher education, as a panacea for removing social and economic inequalities (Watts, 2008). But can widening participation in higher education alone help to reap the benefits of the demographic advantage and bridge economic inequality? Bourdieu (1986) has posited that education abets inequality. Bourdieu has specified that the economic capital is the root of all forms of capital. Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction stated that the cultural capital and the social capital is transmitted from generation to generation (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This implies that economic capital is also transmitted intergenerationally. This leads to growth in economic inequality.

The Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) in higher education is calculated as a percentage of the number of students enrolled in higher education to the

number of people in the age cohort of 18 to 23 years. The GER in India is 26.3 percent in 2018-19. The total enrollment in higher education is estimated at 37.4 million out of around 140 million in that age cohort, as per the All India Survey on Higher Education 2018-19 report (AISHE, 2018). The government of India has targeted to increase the GER to 30% by 2020 (Heslop, 2014). This implies that over 56 million students will have to be provided access to higher education by 2020. Though this target was set in 2012 and might be impossible to meet at this stage, still India is under tremendous pressure to expand its higher education system. This has led to a phenomenal growth in higher education. The higher education scenario has undergone a paradigm shift. The concept of 'one time education for a few' has now drastically changed to 'lifelong education for all' (Bhatia & Dash, 2010, p. 137). The government rolls out various policies for increasing access to higher education. This results in a huge number of first-generation learners entering higher education institutions.

The India Skills Report 2019 has cautioned that the biggest challenge that India will face will be in creating manpower which has the skill sets required for employment. It further states that around 70 percent of the under-graduates have difficulty in finding gainful employment. On the other hand, the employers feel that these under-graduates are not 'employable'. The term 'employable' means that the candidate possesses the skill sets required by the industry. In other words, the quality of the candidate is

established only if he/she acquires the required skill sets. In this era of knowledge based economy, if our target is to bridge economic inequality, we have to acknowledge that while widening the participation in higher education, care should be taken not to compromise on the quality of the workforce.

The companies look for 'industry ready' candidates. Hogan et al. (2013) state that, 'From the employers' perspective, the single-most important characteristic determining employability is interpersonal skill or social competence. '(p.6). Interpersonal skills can be defined as the capabilities to socialize, effectively communicate, cooperate and connect with people in life, at an individual level and within a group. For socializing comfortably with people one needs be confident of oneself. Effective communication will require proficiency in English, which is the business language. Dr. Abdul Kalam, former President of India, has rightly pointed out that the problem plaguing India is not unemployment; it is unemployability (Sinha, 2011).

One of the stated outcomes of higher education is the acquisition of knowledge and higher level skills that will prepare the students for employment (Dearing, 1997). The first-generation learners join higher education with the dream that their education would provide social and financial progression. But the unfortunate fact is that equality of access does not get translated automatically into equality of opportunity in the labour

market (Bhattacharyya, Sarkar & Kar, 2010). Cultural capital is depicted by the language, knowledge, experiences, values and behavior of a person belonging to a dominant social group. This cultural capital is largely inherited from the family (Reay, 2004). Bourdieu (1986) states that parental education plays an important role in acquiring the cultural capital. The parents have the most powerful influence on their children. Kunjumon (2019, p.67) has related Bourdieu's concept to the Indian scenario and posits that, 'The overriding factors which contribute towards educational aspiration are the parental education and occupation.' They endow their children with the cultural capital that is required to make them feel comfortable in an educational system, which will help them to succeed. Since the parents of the first-generation learner have less educational qualifications, the cultural capital of the first-generation learners is very less. So there is a huge cultural barrier between the first-generation learners and the non-first-generation learners. The first-generation learners lack the cultural, social and attributes, which are considered important for employment (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Widening participation in higher education loses its meaning if it does not get effectively translated into progression in the labour market (Osborne, 2003). Otherwise the students will be left only with a degree; not a job.

First Generation Learners

In this study, first-generation learners are defined as those students who are the first in their entire family, across generations, to get admitted in a higher education institution. Their parents would not have attended any formal higher education at all (Ghosh, 2014). For long, the first-generation learners have been subjected to cultural and socio-economic deprivations. Dreze & Goal (2003) have posited that educational disparities in India are to a great extent derived from fundamental inequalities like caste and class. This contributes to the existence of massive inequalities in the Indian society. The first-generation learners invariably belong to the lesser privileged caste and class. Majority of the parents of the first-generation learners belong to the lower economic strata and minority communities (Singh, 1989).

There is a huge disparity in the cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) of the first generation learners and their non-first generation peers. For the non-first generation students, higher education is a way of life; something that is taken for granted. Most often the parents are themselves well educated and view higher education as a natural 'next logical step' after high school for their children. But the first generation learners are almost always from lower socio-economic groups which are characterized by lack of proper career guidance and benchmarks for achievement. Coming from such an environment in which merely getting through high school is by itself an ordeal, higher education represents a stark departure for these students

from their family and societal traditions. Enrollment in a college is therefore a great upheaval for them emotionally. They must adapt not only academically but importantly, socially, with peers who often come from a radically different background. In many aspects they are at a disadvantage compared to their non-first-generation peers. The first generation learners are lesser prepared for success as even their understanding of what success means is at best moderate. They lack the awareness and wherewithal to make informed decisions that can maximize educational progression and its associated benefits. As Leondari (2007) mentions, at this point in time their future time perspective (FTP), which defines their future goals, is a reflection of their social contextual influences. Stevenson & Clegg (2011) have coined the term 'possible selves' to represent the idea of what one might like to become in future or rather their aspirations. The first generation learners have no career guidance. They are not aware of their full potential and their goals or 'possible selves' are set very low.

We have seen that the lack of cultural and social capital of the first generation learners greatly affects their employment prospects (Brown & Hesketh, 2004, p. 31). This is a huge disadvantage for them, when they compete with their non-first-generation counterparts. Moreover, the Wisconsin model of socioeconomic-attainment (which was developed from Blau and Duncan's (1967) model) postulates that the future expectations of the students are strongly influenced by two factors – firstly their socio-

economic background and secondly the norms and expectation of the majority of the people they come in contact with (Hauser, Robert & Anderson, 1991). The two key drivers for success in the labour market are life experiences and expectations. Life experiences are more advantageous for children who belong to a family with greater financial resources. The expectations or goals of children, who have parents competent to provide career level guidance, are set high (Sewell & Hauser, 1992).

All the factors discussed above clearly indicate that the first-generation learners 'did not enter the university on equal terms' (Thomas & Quinn, 2007, p. 56). The first-generation learners need additional assistance to compete with their peers. Pascarella et al. (2004, p. 279) emphasized 'the need for more sharply focused and sustained efforts' by the institutions of higher education to augment the first-generation learners' capabilities. Hirudayaraj (2011, p.7) has recommended, 'skills development and employability modules which provide targeted support from within the institutional set up are essential if these students are expected to make a successful entry in to the knowledge economy and manage to survive there.' Therefore, it is necessary for higher education institutions to provide additional support to the first-generation learners to make them employable.

Skills and Traits necessary for Employment

Employers scout for highly skilled students, who can confidently handle the challenges of increased competition (Sinha, 2011). There are

various abilities and attitudes which can be categorized under 'employability skills'.

Hard skills and soft skills are the most commonly used characterization of skills. Hard skills are related to the technical knowledge and expertise needed for a job. Robles (2012, p. 457) has defined hard skills as 'those achievements that are included on a résumé, such as education, work experience, knowledge, and level of expertise'. Soft skills are mainly characterized by interpersonal qualities and personal attributes that one possesses (Robles, 2012). Though historically hard skills were considered the only skills required for employment, in today's labour market, where organizations are down-sizing and cutting positions, technical skills alone are not enough (James & James, 2004). Employers consider soft skills critical in today's workplace for productive employment. Excellent educational curricula take care of imparting technical skills. But the educational institutions should ensure that targeted interventions are designed to enhance the soft skills of the students. Klaus' (2010) found that 75% of the long-term success of an employee depended on soft skills, while 25% depended on hard skills. Another study conducted by Watts & Watts (2008, as cited in John, 2009) indicated that 85% of an employee's success depended on soft skills and only 15% depended on hard skills. Wilhelm (2004) explicitly stated that progressively employers rated soft skills as the most important characteristic in an employee – or the most important

characteristic necessary for employment. Sutton (2002) reiterated the importance of soft skills stating that they are ranked as number one from the employers' perspective and considered extremely essential for prospective job hires.

Sermsuka et al. (2013) had conducted a survey on the employability skills expected by the employers. The participants were many employers from many companies and business owners in Thailand. Based on the findings of their study, Sermsuka et al. (2013) had concluded that the most important skills or abilities required for employment were Personal management skills, Fundamental skills and Teamwork skills. Personal management skills is defined by a positive and confident attitude. Fundamental skills included communication skills and technical knowledge. Teamwork skills is characterized by maintaining a smooth relationship with others, coordinating and cooperating well with others.

Hogan et al. (2013) mentioned that interpersonal skills or social competence was the most important from the employers' perspective. Interpersonal skills included the capabilities to socialize, effectively communicate, cooperate and connect with people in life, at an individual level and within a group.

For socializing and for working in a team effectively one needs to be self-confident. Based on the above researches, for my study I have taken the skills and traits required for employment to be communication skills,

cooperating and connecting skills and self-confidence. Since English is the business language, for my analysis I have taken English as the language for communication skills.

Cleary et al. (2007) have clearly stated that the teachers in educational institutions should ensure that the students are equipped with the necessary skills and traits required for employment, so that their transition into the labour market will be smooth. Sermsuka et al. (2013) have also recommended a well-established plan or curriculum to assist the students to be well prepared for employment. The hard skills are taken care of by the curriculum for the degree program. But for the soft skills, this indicates the requirement for a special supplementary curriculum to equip the students with the required employability skills expected by the employers.

In the next chapter I will state Bourdieu's concepts of cultural, social and economic capitals and explain its relevance to the Indian context. I will elaborate on the theoretical framework on which my study is built.

Chapter 3

Theoretical Framework

Introduction

One of the pressing issues which India is facing is growing economic inequality. My study focused on whether providing higher education to first generation learners from rural India could be perceived as an initiative to help them to bridge this inequality. Bridging economic inequality implies that the earning potential of these first generation learners should be improved. In short higher education for these first generation learners should lead to gainful employment.

I will analyze the concepts of cultural, social and economic capitals and then explore their implications on the first generation learners and how it impacts their employment prospects.

Cultural, Social and Economic Capital

The focus of my study is on addressing the problem of growing economic inequality in India. Economic capital can be defined as the capacity of a person to exchange resources for monetary or economic benefit. Disparity in the economic capital of individuals is what leads to economic inequality. I will examine what is the basis of acquiring economic capital.

Bourdieu (1986) has spoken of four forms of capital – cultural capital, social capital, economic capital and symbolic capital. Bourdieu emphasizes that economic capital is 'at the root of all other forms of capital' (p.252). But

Bourdieu also felt that solely concentrating on economic capital will not be sufficient for understanding how inequality is created and perpetuated in our society. A thorough analysis of the different forms of capital is necessary for us to comprehend how inequality occurs and continues. Since symbolic capital refers to a person's prestige or honour and is based on his/her cultural, social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986), I will delve more in detail about the other forms of capital. Bourdieu has implied the following relationships between the various forms of capital.

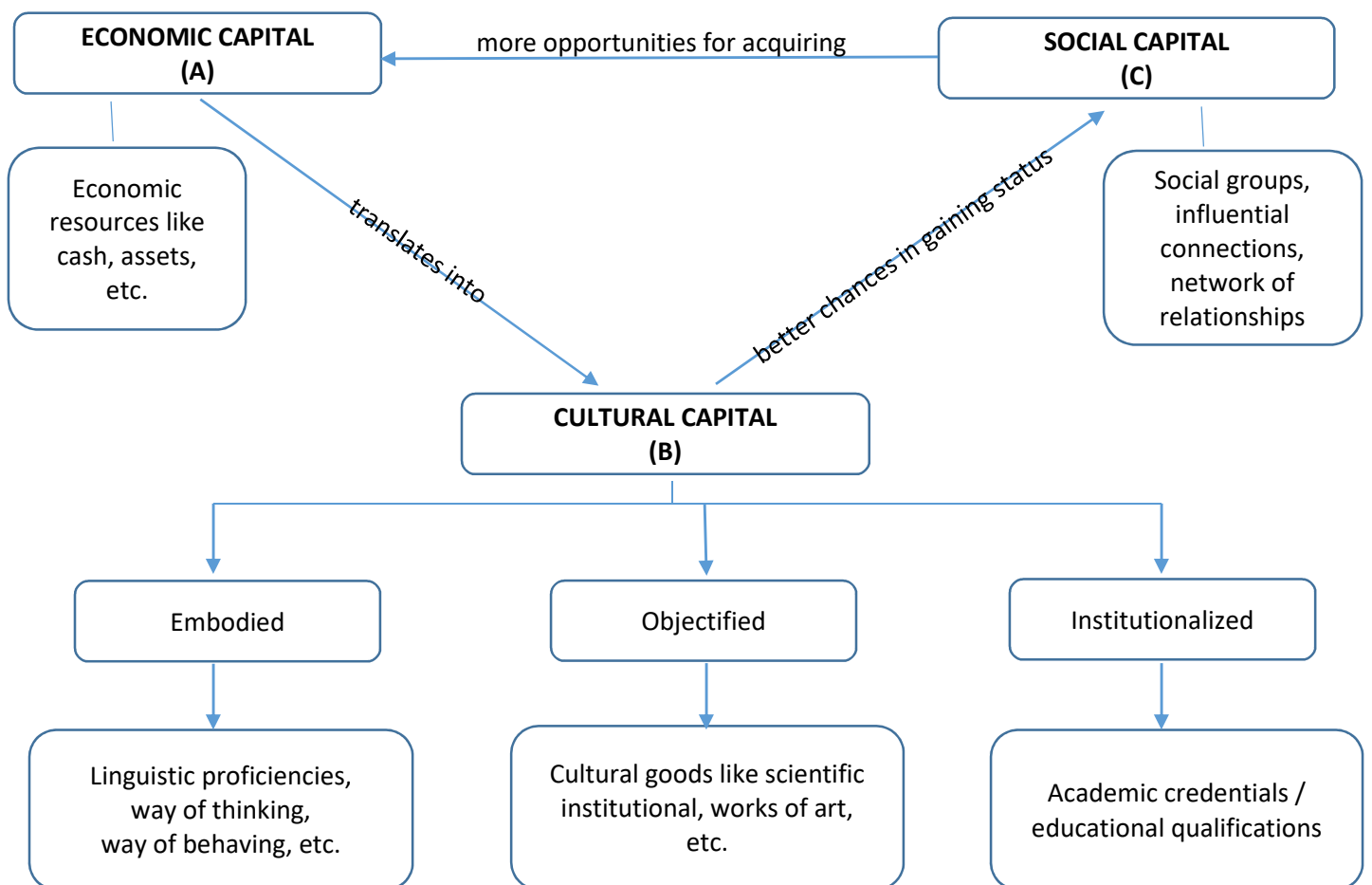


Figure 3 – Bourdieu’s Cultural (B → C → A → B) and Social (C → A → B → C) Reproduction Cycles

Source – Authors own work

Bourdieu posits that economic capital can be translated into cultural capital, since more financial support helps one to acquire more knowledge or skills which helps to increase one’s cultural capital. Increase in cultural capital will provide one better chances in gaining status and acceptance in society, thus boosting the social capital. This enhanced social capital will in turn open up more opportunities for obtaining economic capital. In Figure 3 Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction implies the cycle B → C → A → B. This means that a person with more cultural capital will have better chances of gaining more social capital, which will help him/her to increase his/her economic capital, which in turn will get translated into more cultural capital for his/her descendants. On the other hand, a person with lesser cultural capital will have lesser chances of enhancing his/her social capital, which will be a hindrance for increasing his/her economic capital, which in turn will get translated into lesser cultural capital for his/her descendants. This is Bourdieu’s theory of cultural reproduction.

In Figure 3 Bourdieu’s theory of social reproduction implies the cycle C → A → B → C. This means that a person with more social capital will have better opportunities for increasing his/her economic capital, which will get translated into improvement in his/her cultural capital, which in turn will provide better chances for enhancing the social capital for his/her

descendants. On the other hand, a person with lesser social capital will have lesser opportunities for increasing his/her economic capital, which will get translated into decrease in his/her cultural capital, which in turn will provide lesser chances for enhancing the social capital for his/her descendants. This is Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction.

I will analyze the concepts of cultural capital and social capital and explore how it impacts first-generation learners from the lower economic strata, who have very less cultural and social capital, especially with regards to their employability skills defined by English communication skills, self-confidence and the ability to cooperate and connect with people.

Cultural Capital

The term cultural capital was first articulated by Bourdieu and has since gained widespread popularity. Cultural capital refers to a collection of forces which includes class, family background, behaviour and skills, accumulation of knowledge that one can have access to in order to enable them to succeed.

Bourdieu (1986) states that cultural capital can exist in three forms – embodied state, objectified state and institutionalized state. In general, the embodied state refers to the long-lasting dispositions of the body and mind. It is directly linked to what an individual knows and can do. The embodied capital is something one acquires over time and cannot be communicated instantaneously. The objectified state is represented by cultural goods,

material objects such as instruments, paintings, books, etc. The institutionalized state refers to educational qualifications, which produce, 'a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to power.' (p. 248). These educational qualifications act as a currency for acquiring social and economic capital.

Bourdieu opines that cultural capital is reproduced by economic capital, since it relates to something that one acquires for equipping oneself. He explicitly states that it is very challenging for people from the lower economic strata to achieve success in the education system. Bourdieu (1986, p. 245) posits, 'The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me, in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes and class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions.' Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction has significantly promoted a lot of theoretical and empirical research. The theory of cultural reproduction hypothesizes that the educational system mediates the link between the class membership that a person originates from and the ultimate class membership that he/she would belong to.

Bourdieu's (1986, p. 246) statement that 'the transmission of cultural capital is no doubt the best hidden form of hereditary transmission of capital, and it therefore receives disproportionately greater weight in the system of reproduction strategies, as the direct, visible forms of transmission tend to be more strongly censored and controlled' makes it evident that cultural capital is transmitted intergenerationally.

Many researchers like Werfhorst (2010), Barone (2006) Sullivan (2001) and De Graaf et al. (2000) have emphasized that the educational performance and aspirations of a child is greatly influenced by the parental education. In addition, they have stressed that an individual's cultural capital crucially impacts his/her occupational choices and outcomes. Though there has been a lot of debate and strong criticism (Goldthorpe, 2007) over Bourdieu's approach, the above mentioned studies further support Bourdieu's theory of cultural reproduction.

Social Capital

Social capital refers to the social network that exists between people with shared values and behavior, which could facilitate mutually beneficial social cooperation. Researchers consider social capital as an important factor for producing inequality in income and educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Field, 2003; Lin, 1999; Putnam, 2000).

Bourdieu (1986, p. 248) defines social capital as 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possessions of a durable

network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words to membership of a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a “credential” which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.’

Bourdieu’s perception of social capital explains the harsh realities of social inequalities. His views are depressing, emphasizing that ‘who you know’ has more value than ‘what you know’. Bourdieu further stresses that social capital plays a vital role in preserving and reproducing class structures in the society. This is his theory of social reproduction. There has been a lot of criticism to his theory. Jenkins (2002, p. 91) has commented that Bourdieu’s world, ‘ultimately remains one in which things happen to people, rather than a world in which they can intervene in their individual and collective destinies’. According to Bourdieu, although social capital is distinct from economic capital, they are inseparable.

Coleman has taken a broader perspective of the social capital. Coleman (1988, p. 98) defines social capital as, ‘a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether persons or corporate actors – within the structure. Like other forms of capital, social capital is productive, making possible the achievement of certain ends that in its absence would not be possible’. He fundamentally views social capital

as a positive network of social connections. Coleman considers social capital as one of the potential, productive resources alongside human capital (which refers to one's skills and expertise), physical capital (which refers to tools) and economic capital. Coleman (1988, p. 109) points out that, 'one effect of social capital that is especially important: its effect on the creation of human capital in the next generation'. This implies that social capital is important in educational attainments. His argument that social capital is 'an important resource for individuals and may affect greatly their ability to act and their perceived quality of life' (p. 118) highlights the important role that social capital plays in defining the goals of an individual.

Putnam's (2000) theory of 'bonding social capital' and 'bridging social capital' is very relevant to my research. 'Bonding social capital' refers to the social bond that unites homogenous social groups, whereas 'bridging social capital' denotes the link formed across heterogeneous social groups. Bonding social capital arises out of networking with family, close friends, within the same community. Putnam (2000, p. 23) posits that, 'Bonding social capital constitutes a kind of sociological superglue, whereas bridging social capital provides a sociological WD-40'. Putnam perceives bonding social capital as a kind of a 'superglue', a strong glue, that binds the ties of support and loyalty within a homogenous community, whereas bridging social capital needs a lubricant, like 'WD-40', to bring together people from heterogeneous backgrounds and build a new common ground. It is generally believed that

while bonding social capital will be favourable for members belonging to a closed social group, it has negative impact if we consider the society as a whole. It is more inward looking form of social capital. Bridging social capital has a positive connotation since it connects people across different social groups. It is a more outward looking form of social capital. However, bridging and bonding cannot be considered as mutually exclusive. In reality, in many groups simultaneous bonding along some parameters and bridging along some other dimensions happens. In general, interaction across social groups creates a better foundation for knitting the social fabric.

Coleman's (1988) views have a functionalist bend, which is different from Bourdieu (1986). He does not consider inequality as a cause or result of differences in social capital. While Bourdieu sees social capital as a source of reproduction of inequality, Coleman considers it as a neutral resource with potential public good since it helps to enhance community productivity. Putnam (2000) has addressed a different dimension of social capital and has conceptualized the bonding and bridging of social capital.

Economic Capital

As mentioned earlier, economic capital is the capacity of a person to exchange resources for monetary or economic benefit. All the other forms of capital are eventually reducible to economic capital.

Ultimately all forms of capital are fungible and tied to economic capital and contribute towards reproduction of inequality in the society (Bourdieu,

1986; Field, 2003). These concepts provide an explanation for the growing economic inequality in India. At the same time their views are a bit pessimistic. But they also provide an insight into what types of challenges have to be overcome to fight inequality.

Though Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002, p. 45) state that 'intergenerational inequality has important self-maintaining properties. It creates conditions under which individuals in less advantaged positions choose and act in ways that can in themselves be understood as adaptively quite rational.... yet which, in aggregate, serve to perpetuate the status quo', they strongly recommend that 'complementary efforts to reduce inequality of conditions, and especially class inequalities in economic security, stability and prospects, will also be required'. I will explore what complementary efforts could be effective in reducing inequality.

Abundant literature is available that highlights the contribution of education to economic growth, poverty reduction and reduction in inequalities (Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985; Tilak, 1994). Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that education plays a vital role in abetting and aiding the reproduction of social inequality, which in turn results in economic inequality.

Relevance of Bourdieu's Concepts to India

Bourdieu was a French sociologist. His work was predominantly related to the dynamics of power in the society and how power and social order

were maintained across generations. He stressed that social classes preserved their societal privileges intergenerationally. Though Bourdieu's theory analyzed the role of education in the reproduction of inequality in France (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990), researchers from other countries have used his concepts to understand the changing practices and policies in tertiary and higher education. Naidoo (2004) has recommended that adaptation and refinement of his theories are very useful in understanding various conditions of inequality in other countries as well.

In particular, I will explore how Bourdieu's concepts apply to the caste system in India and also examine what language could be used as a basis for calculating the linguistic capital for my study.

1. Caste System

It is interesting to note that Bourdieu emphasized that the structure of power is 'quasi-universal' and 'transhistorical' (Wacquant, 1993). It existed in various forms across centuries and was prevalent in different civilizations and cultures. Speller (2011) had specifically provided the link between Bourdieu's concepts and the Indian society. He stated that, 'Bourdieu follows Georges Duby to find a precedent in the opposition between the bellatores (those who fight) and oratores (those who pray) in medieval society, and refers to Georges Dumézil's trifunctional hypothesis, which discovers the same triad in Indian society (which splits between the Brahmin and Kshatriya castes), and represented in various mythic systems. The third

term refers to the dominated, peasants, commoners, or workers.' (p. 16). This provides a view of the caste system prevalent in India.

According to Nigosian (2000), India's caste system is among the world's oldest forms of surviving social stratification. Sankaran et al. (2017) state that, 'The Indian caste system is a complex social structure wherein social roles like one's profession became 'hereditary,' resulting in restricted social mobility and fixed status hierarchies.' (p. 1). The Indian caste system is a typical example of Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction.

Though Speller (2011) had mentioned a triad in ancient India, there were actually four classifications of caste based on their profession. The highest caste was the Brahmins, who were priests and scholars – the oratores (those who pray). At the next level were the Kshatriyas, who were warriors and kings - the bellatores (those who fight). Below this level were the Vaishyas, who were the farmers, traders and merchants. The next level were the Shudras, who were labourers. Besides these levels, there was an additional 'untouchable' group, who were considered to be too low to belong to any caste. They were at the bottommost step of the social ladder (Pick & Dayaram, 2006). They were linked with occupations that were considered as ritually impure, involving removal of carcasses and waste. The social status of a person was typically determined by his/her caste.

In modern India, a categorization scheme of castes was introduced by the Indian government. The Forward Caste (FC) generally constituted the

high caste groups, which were the Brahmins and the Kshatriyas, the Other Backward Caste (OBC) or Backward Caste (BC) were the Vaishyas and the Shudras and the Scheduled Caste (SC) were the 'untouchables'. Further the tribal population in remote areas were categorized as Scheduled Tribes (ST). Post-independence, the Indian constitution banned caste-based discrimination.

Tilak & Choudhury (2018) have calculated how inclusive higher education is in India, based on the NSSO surveys, conducted in 2007-08 and 2013-14. They have examined the inequalities in education based on several characteristics like caste, gender, economic conditions, religion and between several regions (urban and rural). Inequalities in education based on caste and gender have attracted the attention of policy makers. In order to rectify historical injustices and to provide the oppressed class a level playing field, the Indian government has announced quotas in educational institutions for the BCs, SCs and STs. Tilak & Choudhury (2018) have observed that while there is improvement in the status of education of the OBCs, SCs and STs, still the absolute levels of the status of education for these oppressed castes are far below that of their counterparts.

2. Linguistic capital

India is home to multiple languages. As per article 343 of the Indian Constitution, Hindi and English have been declared as the official languages of the Union of India. These are the official languages at the Central

Government level. However, based on its linguistic demographics, each state is permitted to have its own official language. There are 22 languages which have been declared as official languages for usage at the State level.

Though education mainly comes under the jurisdiction of the Central Government, the State Government has an important role to play in the development of education within a state. Power and politics are important factors behind the selection of language used as a medium of instruction for education. The Right to Education (RTE) Act was passed in India in 2009, to ensure that each and every child in India is provided elementary education irrespective of their caste or economic background. This bill also includes a clause that as far as practicable the medium of instruction should be in the child's mother tongue (Bhattacharya & Jiang, 2018). The RTE Act aimed at encouraging all the parents, from the lower economic strata, to send their children to school. The intention was that if the medium of instruction was in the mother tongue, then the students would find it more comfortable and easier to understand and this in turn would reduce the drop-out rates in school. As Bourdieu (1992) has stated if the students' linguistic habitus is congruent to the medium of instruction in school then the probability of them successfully completing their education is more.

Das Gupta (1970) has categorically stated that, 'language politics has proved to be one of the most important positive democratic channels for pursuing political integration as well as political development.' (p. 270). The

State Governments used this clause in the RTE Act to promote the official language of their respective states. So the medium of instruction in most of the government schools, which provided free education for the underprivileged students, was the state/regional language. This supports Bourdieu's (1992) theory that the educational system plays a vital role in the process of imposition and legitimization of an official language. The States' decision to promote the regional language as the medium of instruction in government schools might have encouraged the students from underprivileged background to pursue school education. Bourdieu, Passeron, & de saint Martin (1994, p.40) have contended that, 'the influence of a child's original language setting never cease to operate.' Based on this argument, when we consider the higher education and employment markets in India, which require proficiency in English, these students are at a disadvantage.

Bourdieu (1992) has stated that the linguistic capital is based on the proficiency in the language, which holds value in a particular market. In majority of the higher education institutions in India, the medium of instruction is English. Bourdieu, Passeron & de saint Martin (1994) have emphasized, 'The more distant the social group from scholastic language, the higher the rate of scholastic mortality' (p. 41). English can be considered as a form of linguistic capital possessed by an individual, which can be used for acquiring other cultural capitals like grades and academic success. Since

the business language in India is also English, in the employment market the linguistic capital required for an individual to succeed in this market is also proficiency in English.

Based on the above arguments, for my study I have taken the proficiency in English for determining the linguistic capital of an individual, since my study is related to the higher education and employment market.

I will now examine the cultural, social and economic capital of the first-generation learners with reference to the sub-components of each of the capitals listed in Figure 3 and analyze their impact on the employability skills.

Cultural Capital

1. Embodied state

The embodied cultural capital is acquired over time and is mainly influenced by one's habitus. It basically defines the way one thinks, his/her aspirations, the way one behaves, etc. The first-generation learners invariably belong to the lesser privileged caste and class (Singh, 1989). They place a higher priority on working and earning for the family and lower priority on higher education (Priebe, Ross & Low, 2008). The personal values of individuals are greatly influenced by their family background and the situations they face in their life (Gunetilleke, De Silva & Lokuge, 2011). Since the parents and the siblings of the first-generation learners have no experience or understanding about college education, they are not of any

great support to them (Hsiao, 1992). They lack the environment, guidance and stimulation for learning. Their home environment is non-facilitating and may even be discouraging of educational and intellectual pursuits (Ghosh, 2014). They have to face the tension of balancing between two cultures – one culture that encompasses their parents and friends without any college experience and the other culture that encompasses the higher education settings (Striplin, 1999). The first-generation learners are lesser prepared in academic skills and life skills than their peers, who are non-first-generation learners (Terenzini, 1995). They feel very intimidated and hesitate to interact with their peers or seek help from their faculty (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). They are hindered with self-doubt about their competence to compete with their peers and excel (Kim & Sax, 2009). This hugely impacts the two employability skills, which are self-confidence and their ability to connect and mingle with others.

Bourdieu (1997) has included linguistic capital as a form of embodied cultural capital. In India, the majority of the first-generation learners come from rural villages, where the medium of education in the schools is the regional language. Their examinations are also conducted in the regional language. Their lack of proficiency in English is a tremendous disadvantage for them (Malhoit, 2005). In all reputed higher education institutions in India, the medium of instruction is English. This is a big hurdle for first-generation learners, since they find it very difficult to comprehend the

instructions given. Communication skill is one of the important components of employability skills. In short, the first-generation learners have very less embodied cultural capital when compared to the non-first generation learners.

2. Objectified state

Objectified cultural capital refers to cultural goods like work of arts, scientific instruments owned by an individual. These physical objects not only serve the purpose of being traded for economic benefit, but also a taste – an appreciation – for these goods in the individual. The first-generation learners, who come from very poor economic background, lack in objectified cultural capital as well.

3. Institutionalized state

Institutionalized cultural capital comprises academic credentials or educational qualifications. The very definition of the first-generation learners indicates that their parents and siblings have no exposure to higher education. Time and again, research studies have highlighted the relationship between the academic success of students and parental education. Feinstein, Duckworth and Sabates (2004) have established that parental education is one of the most crucial factors that impact the educational pursuits of their children. According to Knighton and Mirza (2002, p. 1), 'Parents with more education tend to share in their children's intellectual pursuits and pass down skills and beliefs that are conducive to

achievement'. The high importance the parents place on education gets transmitted and these parents provide an environment conducive to higher educational aspirations and achievements of their children. Their home environment of the first-generation learners may be discouraging for intellectual and educational pursuits. Since the first generation learners of my study have completed their twelfth standard, they possess some institutionalized cultural capital. But when compared with the non-first generation learners their institutionalized cultural capital is very less.

Social Capital

Social networks and influential connections are central to social capital. As Bourdieu has mentioned, 'who you know' has more value than 'what you know'. This is the basis of social capital. One's social capital will be high if the individual has membership to an influential group. In India, the first-generation learners invariably belong to the lesser privileged caste and class (Singh, 1989). Their social contacts are restricted to their village people. They have very less access to the influential group. So they will possess limited social capital. Research has shown that the first-generation have difficulty in socially integrating with their peers and faculty (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). When compared to their non-first generation peers, they feel more hesitant to move out of their social group and interact freely with others from higher societal network. This impacts their self-confidence levels

and their ability to connect and cooperate with people with higher social capital is limited.

The relationship between the employability skills and the cultural and social capitals is depicted in Figure 4.

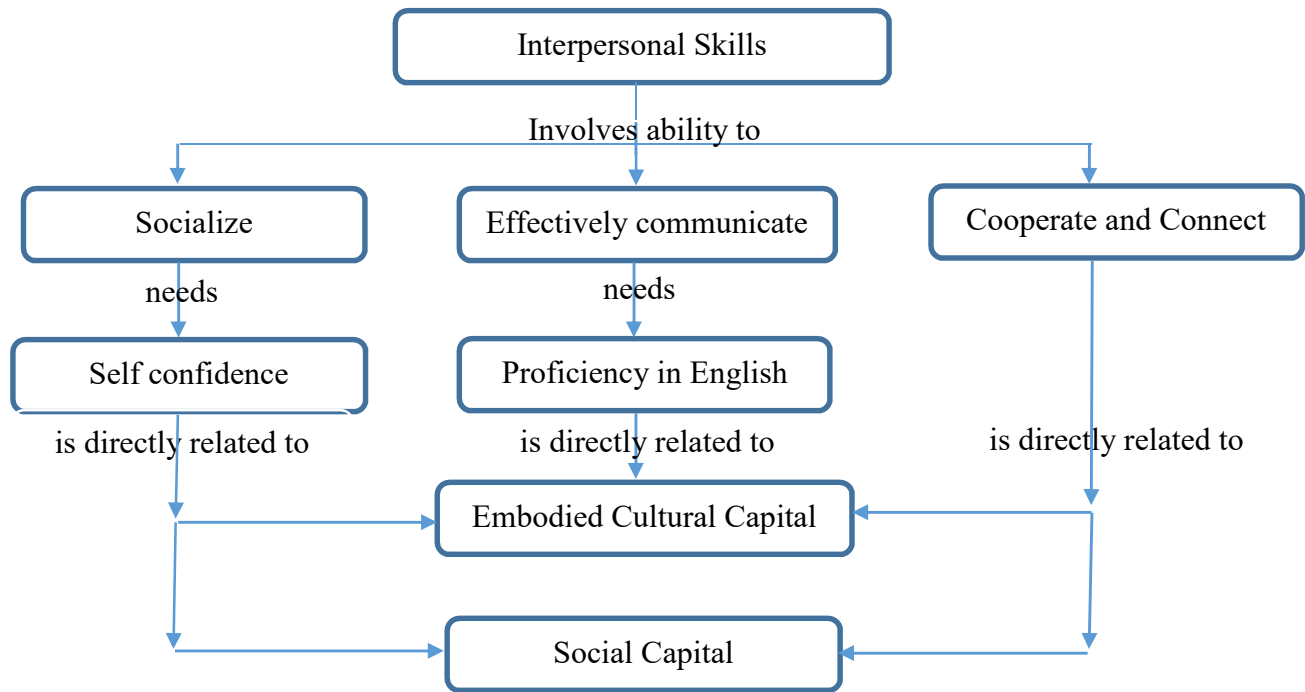


Figure 4 – Author’s Analysis of Employability Skills

Source – Authors own work

Economic Capital

The majority of the parents of the first-generation learners belong to the lower economic strata and minority communities (Singh, 1989). In particular, my study focused on first-generation learners, whose parents work as labourers – agricultural or non-agricultural. As per the analysis by Desai et al. (2010) the agricultural labourers belong to the lowest quintile and the non-agricultural labourers belong to the next-to-lowest quintile. So their economic capital is very less.

Economic growth of the first-generation learners implies that the higher education should lead to their productive employment. My study explored what types of complementary initiatives would be perceived as

effective by rural, first generation learners in equipping them with the employability skills required to meet the expectations of the labour market.

As justified in the Methodology section, I felt that a qualitative, phenomenology approach would be best suited for my research.

A qualitative phenomenological approach along with the cultural capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986) and Erikson & Goldthorpe (2002); the social capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) and the economic capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986) served as the theoretical scaffolding for my study.

In the next chapter I will state the research questions and provide details pertaining to participants' selection, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations and validations for my study.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Introduction

There is an urgent requirement for India to address the problem of growing economic inequality. Taking the demographics of India into account, education leading to gainful employment for the first-generation learners is one sustainable way of addressing this problem. Bourdieu's cultural reproduction theory (Bourdieu, 1986) and social reproduction theory (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) states that education plays a vital role in abetting and aiding the reproduction of social inequality, which in turn results in economic inequality. If this social reproduction theory is true under all conditions, without a secondary education and degree, the youth from economically lower strata of the society will not be able to achieve social or economic transformation. The assumption is that higher education and well-developed employability skills will lead to greater social and economic transformation at the individual (and familial) level for the youth from the lower economic strata, which in turn will help narrow the growing social and economic inequality at the national level.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of a cohort of first generation learners who had undergone a specially designed supplementary curriculum at our institution, which was aimed at developing

the employability skills that led to employment and earnings for the first-generation graduates from our institution. This study also aimed to understand the educational and employment experiences of the first-generation graduates from our institution, and analyze whether their experiences helped them acquire cultural, social and economic capitals at and beyond our institution.

The obstacles and challenges that the first generation learners, entering our institution, faced are numerous and multifarious. They were transitioning into a totally unfamiliar academic world – an environment which was culturally and socially very different. The lectures were conducted in English, which was alien to them, since their entire schooling had been in Tamil, the regional language. Within a short span of 4 years of undergraduate studies they had to acquire the employability skills to achieve their purpose of getting meaningfully employed. They had to compete with the non-first generation learners and enter the labour market. In the light of these complex hurdles, the purpose of my study was to generate a better understanding of lived experiences of the rural, first generation learners, who had to face these challenges. An additional interesting phenomenon I explored was how their improved economic status impacted their family. My study was framed by the following primary research question and a list of secondary research questions which contributed towards answering the overarching primary research question.

Research Questions

Primary research question:

How effective did a cohort of rural, first generation learners find a specially designed supplementary curriculum in enhancing the outcome of higher education in terms of their employability skills and economic status?

Secondary research questions:

1. Based on Bourdieu's (1986) definition of cultural, social and economic capitals, what capitals did the rural, first generation learners bring upon admission to our institution?
2. What is the relevance of Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) with regards to the originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership of the rural, first generation learners, who had undergone the specially designed curriculum of our institution?
3. How did first-generation graduates' originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership differ at personal and family level?
4. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in navigating the cultural barriers?
5. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in acquiring the skills and attitude necessary for employment,

such as proficiency in English, self-confidence and the ability to connect and cooperate with others?

6. What challenges did the rural, first generation learners at our institution experience in higher education and in employment?

Qualitative Phenomenological Approach

Denzin & Lincoln (2005) have recommended that the qualitative methodology will be ideal for researchers, who have an agenda to advance social justice. They defined qualitative research as, 'a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world' and stressed that 'qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them.' (p. 3). Creswell (2013) has stated that qualitative research is an inquiry process that explores a human or social problem. Hays & Singh (2012, p.6) have postulated that qualitative research is appropriate for understanding, 'how participants create and give meaning to social experience'. Further Hays & Singh (2012) emphasized that qualitative research will be most suitable for interpreting the meaning of data through themes. Merriam (2009, p. 13) has stated, 'Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning

people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world’.

Though qualitative research was the choice for my study, I also found that qualitative researchers have a perplexing number of choices of research design. Creswell (2013) has defined five approaches to qualitative research, namely, narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and case study research. Each of these approaches had different focuses. A narrative approach focused on the life of a single person. A phenomenological approach focused on the lived experiences of several individuals about a particular concept or phenomenon. A grounded theory approach focused on developing a theory. An ethnographical approach was used for describing a culture-sharing group. A case study was used for examining a specific case, with the purpose of portraying the intricacies of the case (Creswell, 2013). From the five approaches to qualitative research defined by Creswell (2013), since my study was based on the lived experiences of the rural, first generations learners, I felt that the phenomenological approach was most suited for my research. I used phenomenology as my data analytic framework as it took into account the individuals’ narratives of lived experiences in the context of some phenomenon (Cilesiz, 2009; Husserl, 1970; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon I analyzed was first generation learners – the challenges they face in higher education and employment. A phenomenologist is required to

collect data from persons related to a particular phenomenon and reduce the individual experiences to provide a universal essence (van Manen, 1990). Further Moustakas (1994) has suggested that a phenomenologist should develop a comprehensive description from the lives of the persons experiencing the phenomenon of 'what' they underwent and 'how' they underwent it. As specified by Max van Manen (2016), lived experience is the start point and end point of phenomenological research. Sutton and Austin (2015, p.226) have stated that phenomenological approach provided the 'researchers the opportunity to put themselves in another person's shoes and to understand the subjective experiences of participants'.

Since my aim was to comprehend the lives of the first-generation graduates - the challenges they faced and what helped them overcome these hurdles -I felt that a qualitative methodology combined with a phenomenological approach was most suited for my study. The phenomenological approach helped me to understand in-depth the challenges faced by the first generation learners from their perspective and to get an insight into how they overcame them.

Participants Selection

In 2008, in order to provide inclusive and equitable education, our institution started the Rural Scholarship Scheme. Under this scheme, every year, our institution admitted twenty first-generation learners from rural government schools in the state of Tamil Nadu in India into our engineering

programs and provided financial support to cover their entire cost of education, boarding and lodging for 4 years. This Rural Scholarship Scheme was applicable to only those students who stood first in their school in the higher secondary board examination. Our institution invited applications by intimating the Headmasters of these schools about this scholarship scheme and selected 20, from over two hundred applications that were received, based on their annual family income and their eagerness to pursue higher education. The parents of these first-generation learners were typically farming daily wage labourers or weaving daily wage labourers. The average daily wage of these workers would be around USD 2, as per the Wage Rates in Rural India 2013-14 report. The typical profile of these students was:

- First generation learners from challenging socio-economic background
- Lacking any significant exposure to the life beyond their villages
- Would have not been able to pursue higher education in engineering due to financial constraints
- Belonged to either Backward Caste (BC) or Scheduled Caste (SC)
- School education in Tamil (regional language) medium

The participants for this study were the first generation graduates, who had completed their twelfth standard in 2008. They had been admitted into our engineering undergraduate program under the Rural Scholarship Scheme in the year 2008 and completed their education in 2012. 10 of them were male and 10 were female. Two of them had been working for 2 months

after their twelfth standard and before joining our institution as labourers, just for their sustenance. Their monthly income was less than Rs 500/- per month during this period. The first batch of 20 students (10 male and 10 female) admitted under this scheme were all placed in the campus recruitment drive. I have tabulated below the annual income of their family when they entered our institution and the compensation offers they got from companies, which they joined on completion of their engineering degree in 2012. For the sake of anonymity, I am using the names M1, M2,..., M10 for the male and F1, F2,..., F10 for the female members.

Name	Family Annual income in 2008 (in Rs.)	FGL's* Annual Income as per Job offer in 2012 (in Rs.)
M1	30,000	4,00,000
M2	17,000	2,50,000
M3	Nil (helped by foster grandfather)	3,25,000
M4	24,000	3,25,000
M5	24,000	3,25,000
M6	50,000	3,20,000
M7	25,000	3,20,000
M8	25,000	3,25,000
M9	20,000	3,25,000
M10	24,000	3,20,000
F1	24,000	4,00,000
F2	48,000	3,50,000
F3	36,000	4,50,000
F4	30,000	3,20,000
F5	55,000	2,85,000
F6	50,000	2,50,000
F7	24,000	3,20,000
F8	24,000	3,20,000
F9	30,000	3,25,000
F10	20,000	3,25,000

Table 1 Annual Income: In 2008 Vs. In 2012

Source – Authors own work

* First Generation Learner

From this table we can see that there is a distinct enhancement in the earnings of all the 20 candidates in 2012, when compared to the annual income of their family, where they originated from, in 2008.

In 2017, with the permission from our institution and through the Alumni Officer of our institution, I sent an email to all the 20 candidates, who were admitted under the Rural Scholarship in 2008, inviting them to participate in my study. I particularly confined my study to the first cohort, since they would have had at least five years of employment in the industry and would be able to reflect on their experiences. Moreover, one needed at least five years of time period to achieve any change in their class membership. This five years' period would also be required to have any impact on their family's cultural, social and economic status.

Out of the 20 students in this cohort, 15 students responded expressing their willingness to participate in this study. We were unable to contact the remaining 5 students. As per Table 1 these students had also got gainfully employed and had an enhancement in their economic status. Since we had got the willingness from 75% of the students in this cohort, we did not pursue our efforts to contact the other 5 students. Out of the 15 students who had expressed their willingness to participate in my study, two female students were unable to participate since one of them delivered her

first baby and the other female student's husband had an accident during the period fixed for interviews. So my study was conducted with participation from the remaining 13 students. My aim was to understand in-depth the lived experiences of these 13 participants.

The inclusion criterion was only first-generation learners admitted under the Rural Scholarship Scheme in our institution in the undergraduate engineering program in the year 2008. All the other first-generation learners and all non-first-generation learners in our institution or any other higher education institution were excluded.

Specially Designed Supplementary Curriculum

Research has suggested that targeted counseling and mentorship facilitated the successful transition of the first-generation learners from institutions of higher education into the labour market (Owens et al., 2010). Payne (2007) has strongly recommended proactive advising. It is important to create a conducive academic environment that affirms the first generation learners' strengths and encourages their academic pursuits and also provides opportunities for supplementary instruction, remedial instruction and employability skills development. Throughout the four years of undergraduate engineering program at our institution, the first-generation learners were provided additional support like orientation course, mentorship, guidance, special classes for academics, special coaching classes for English and placement orientation classes. Pascarella et al.

(2004) have posited that the possibility of the first-generation learners acquiring cultural and social capital is more when they are encouraged to take part in extra-curricular activities. At our institution we encouraged the first-generation learners to take part in societal activities like NSS (National Social Service), sports and also co-curricular activities like partaking in seminars, technical symposium, etc. All these initiatives aimed at developing their cultural and social capital, and providing socio-economic transformation through employment for these first-generation learners. The brief of the supplementary curriculum specially designed for the first-generation learners at our institution is given below.

1. Orientation course

The first year was very important since it created the foundation for ensuring a successful transition (Scott, 2008). Hogan et al. (2013) described employability as being based not only on knowledge, skills and abilities but also on other aspects of character such as personal aspirations, social skills and communication skills. The orientation course aimed at laying a strong base for improving the employability skills and traits of the first-generation learners, such as English communication skills, self-confidence and the cooperating and connecting skills. The cultural and social capital of a candidate impacted the way he/she was viewed in the recruitment process (Kupfer, 2012). The orientation course helped in preparing the first-generation learners to improve their cultural and social capital. English

communication skills would facilitate better understanding of the subjects, which were taught in English, thus leading to better academic credentials, which built their cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1997). Improvement in cooperating and connecting skills and self-confidence levels would help them to interact confidently with their peers and the outside world and will build their social capital.

At our institution, the orientation course had been specially designed for the first-generation learners, who were admitted under the Rural Scholarship Scheme. The objectives of the course were set as follows:

- a. Increase their comfort levels in English since the medium of instruction in engineering was English
- b. Develop their English communication skills and help them overcome their limitations in terms of listening, speaking, reading and writing skills
- c. Enhance their peer interaction skills which will help in cooperating and connecting
- d. Build their overall self-confidence and enable them join the mainstream students without any inhibitions

In my experience, when the first-generation learners entered our institution, they would hardly be able to speak a single line in English, since they would have done their entire schooling in the regional language. The effectiveness of this foundation orientation course played a vital role in the

progress of the first-generation learners undergoing the undergraduate engineering program. The students assembled about 3 weeks prior to the regular start of the first year academic sessions. All the students were residential and this training program was their first experience of being away from their families. To start with, this acclimatization process without rigorous academic work helped them later in coping with their regular schedule. Training was done mostly in English with very little usage of regional language and that too, limited only to enhance their understanding of the content. This was another important part of the acclimatization process that will make them "comfortable" with English as a medium of instruction. External experts were identified by the institution to teach the different modules in the course. Students' performance in this orientation course had no bearing on their subsequent academic pursuits.

2. Mentorship

A faculty member, who was conversant with the challenges met by the first generation learners, was allocated to each first-generation learner admitted under the Rural Scholarship Scheme to provide mentorship and assistance throughout their four years at our institution. In addition to monitoring their class room activities, the mentor would meet them at least once in a week. During these sessions they could express the difficulties experienced by them, if any, be it in the classroom or hostel. The mentor would counsel them and assist them in overcoming these difficulties. The

mentor also understood their interests and strengths and provided them career guidance. The mentor motivated them to realize their full potential. In short the mentor provided the support and guidance which the non-first generation learners get from their parents.

3. Additional coaching classes for academics

Since all of them had done their schooling in their mother tongue, namely, Tamil, they found it difficult to understand the classroom lectures, given in English. To obviate this initial difficulty, during the freshman year, every day in the evening, classes in the regular subjects were taken for them by faculty who were conversant in Tamil. The faculty would teach using both Tamil and English, thus making them feel comfortable. They cleared any doubts they might have had during the regular classes. When they entered their second year, they would have got over their initial inhibitions and would be able to understand the classroom lectures. However, students would be asked to indicate the subjects in which they needed additional coaching, which was also provided as done during the freshman year.

4. Additional coaching classes in English

Though the orientation course had a module to improve their English communication skills, this was hardly sufficient for them to compete with their peers, who had the advantage of 12 years of schooling in English. So throughout their four years of undergraduate studies, special coaching

classes in English was designed for them to hone their English communication skills.

5. Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities

The first generation learners were encouraged to get themselves enrolled in various extra-curricular activities such as National Social Service, Youth Red Cross, literary clubs and sports right from their freshman year. During their third year in college, they were encouraged to involve themselves in co-curricular activities like seminars, workshops, conferences and other technical events. These provided them an opportunity to mingle with their peers and students from other educational institutions, which helped them to hone their social skills and feel more self-confident.

6. Special placement training

Our engineering program is of four years duration and has eight semesters. At the end of the first semester and fifth semester, a placement orientation session was held for the first generation learners. In these sessions, our alumni, who were well placed in the industry, addressed them and made them aware of the industry scenario and the expectations of the industry. At the end of their fifth semester, a diagnostic test was conducted to assess their aptitude, technical skills, interview skills and coding skills. The diagnostic test results provided a fair idea to the first generation learners and the Placement Office of the strengths and weaknesses of these students and helped in planning training interventions and providing practice

tests. Training interventions were scheduled for these students between the sixth and seventh semesters based on the above results.

The first generation learners were offered practice tests to take every week all through the sixth semester on aptitude and technical skills. A diagnostic test was conducted again before the recruitment season started for these students to be aware of their improvement and also for them to plan areas in which they could improve further. The faculty from each department conducted a training cum workshop for strengthening the core and technical concepts of these first generation learners. Finally, a three-day classroom training program was conducted on company specific questions. Many mock interviews were conducted for the first generation learners by our alumni and the Placement Office.

All these interventions aimed at helping them confidently handle the recruitment interviews and tests conducted by the companies, which came for campus recruitment during their final year at our institution.

Data Collection

I first got the approval from our institution for conducting my study on our alumni and requested the assistance of the Alumni Officer and the Administrative Officer at our institution for my data collection and safe-keeping of my data. The Alumni Officer of our institution invited the 20 alumni through email to participate in my study. This invitation email contained a brief description of the study as well as the Participant

Information Sheet and Participant Consent form. These documents clearly conveyed to them that their participation was voluntary, and their confidentiality and anonymity would be maintained. Those who were willing to participate in this study were asked to send a scanned copy of their signed consent form through email, within 7 days of receipt of the email. Consent was received from fifteen alumni (seven male and eight female) from this cohort expressing their willingness to participate in this study. On receiving their consent, the Alumni Officer arranged the time that was convenient to the participants for the interview. Two persons who had given their consent were unable to participate, since one of them delivered a baby and the other person's husband had an accident and was hospitalized during the time frame fixed for their interviews. So both of them communicated their inability to participate in the interview process. Three participants were interviewed in person and ten of them were interview over telephone. In order to develop a comprehensive and deep understanding of the first generation learner's life experiences through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, I created an Interview Guide, containing open-ended lead questions (given in the Appendix). Creswell (2013) has recommended that the more open-ended the questions are the better, since it will provide the researcher a better clarity on the life settings of the participants.

The interview was divided into three parts. The first part was related to the life of the first-generation learner before joining our institution. The

second part dealt with his/her experiences during the four years at our institution exploring whether their educational experiences helped develop employability skills and acquire cultural, social and economic capitals. The third part led to understanding the current life of the first-generation learner. I felt that semi-structured interviews would be the most effective method for learning from the participants their life stories. Seidman (2006, p.9) has rightly stated, 'At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience'.

I conducted the interviews based on the open-ended lead questions provided in the Interview Guide. During the course of the interview, depending on their responses, there were other questions added to make them critically view their struggles and challenges. The participants reflected on their lived experience before joining our institution and at our institution and responded to how higher education had impacted their employability skills and traits thereby translating it into a higher cultural, social, economic capital and advanced class membership. The interviews were conducted in Tamil, so that the participants would be comfortable in sharing their feelings and emotions. It was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards. It was then translated into English. The Administrative Officer (AO) of our institution is a non-academic person and maintained all the confidential data of our institution. After transcription and translation, the recorded

interviews were handed over to the AO for safe custody. The emails containing the Participant Consent form signed by the alumni participants were also forwarded to the AO through email by the Alumni Officer. These emails were then deleted from the Alumni Officer's mailbox. The recorded interviews and the emails containing the Participant Consent form signed by the alumni participants will be in the safe custody of the AO for 5 years. It will be destroyed after that.

Data Analysis

A study begins with one or more research questions and these questions dictate the design of the study. Based on my research questions, I needed to have a thorough, in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of my participants, who were first generation learners. Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2011) opined that 'the interview is not simply concerned with collecting data about life: it is part of life itself, its human embeddedness is inescapable' (p. 267). So semi-structured interviews, based on open-ended questions from the Interview Guide I had created, was best suited for my study. I interviewed the participants in Tamil (the medium in which they are comfortable) and transcribed it verbatim and then translated it into English.

Stake (1995, p. 71) has clearly stated, 'There is no particular moment when data analysis begins. Analysis is a matter of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations'. This implied that data analysis

started from the time the data was collected and ended only when the study was complete. Following this recommendation, I have listed in this section the entire process of data analysis till the end.

I used the Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework for conducting the analysis, underpinned by phenomenology. I have given below the six steps involved and the actions I have taken in each step.

Step 1 - Become familiar with the data.

I familiarized myself with the transcripts by reading and re-reading them. This gave me a better insight into the data. The more I re-read the transcripts the more I could understand from their perspective about their lives, their feelings, the challenges they faced and how they struggled to overcome them. This is very important for a phenomenological study.

Step 2 - Generate initial codes

From the translated interviews, I jotted down data which were relevant to my research questions. I used the open coding method, ie. I did not have any pre-set codes. Esterberg (2002, p.158) has aptly stated that open coding was the time 'you work intensively with your data, line by line, identifying themes and categories that seem of interest'. This was a time consuming phase, since it involved repeatedly reading through the translated interview scripts line by line. As I worked through the coding process, I developed and modified the codes.

Step 3 - Search for themes

From the codes, I searched for themes linking the codes. It was not as difficult as I expected, since many of the codes clearly fitted into a broader theme, which could be related to my research questions.

Step 4 - Review themes

This was a difficult phase, since I found that many of my themes overlapped. Many of the themes had sub-themes as well. There was a lot of modifications to be done at this stage. I tabulated the themes and the sub-themes. This gave me a clearer idea of what themes were redundant. Some of the themes were dropped and some of themes were converted into sub-themes, supporting a main theme. The tabulated themes and sub-themes are given below:

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1 Socio-economic background	Social beliefs and norms of people in the first generation learners' village
	Ambition of friends, relatives and villagers
	Family's financial position
	Motivators
Theme 2 Cultural background	Education and livelihood of family
	Proficiency in English language
	Exposure to life beyond their village
	Aspirations
Theme 3 Challenges in the journey towards entering higher education	Social Hurdles
	Deficiencies in school education

	Financial constraints
	Lack of guidance
Theme 4 Induction and orientation	Awe and apprehension
	Initial hiccups
	Ability to understand subjects and communicate with faculty and students
Theme 5 - Overcoming cultural and communication barriers	Cultural differences and their resolution
	Communication barriers and their resolution
	Mentorship and interaction with peers and faculty
Theme 6 - English and academics	Special coaching classes for English
	Special coaching classes for academics
Theme 7 Challenges in getting employed	Barriers
	Drivers (motivators)
	Employability skills acquired
	Special placement training
	Group Discussion and Aptitude Test
	Thinking and Problem Solving capabilities
	Quantitative Analysis, Reasoning Analysis and Advanced Vocabulary
Theme 8 Current cultural status	Further educational qualifications
	Educational qualification of sibling
	Proficiency in English
	Changes in lifestyle
Theme 9 Current socio-economic status	Friends and work environment
	Economic status of the first generation learners
	Economic status of the family

	Role model
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Table 2 - Initial Themes

Source – Author’s own work

Step 5 - Define themes

Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 92) have stated that the aim of this step was to ‘identify the “essence” of what each theme is about.’ I had to relook at the tabulated themes and sub-themes. This was the final refinement and I had to make sure that the sub-themes related to the themes and each theme was relevant for providing an answer to my research questions. I combined some of the themes and finally I had the following 6 well-defined themes:

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1 Socio-economic background	Social beliefs and norms of people in the first generation learners’ village
	Ambitions of friends, relatives and villagers
	Family’s financial position
	Motivators
Theme 2 Cultural background	Education and livelihood of family
	Proficiency in English language
	Exposure to life beyond their village
	Aspirations
Theme 3 Challenges in the journey towards entering higher education	Social Hurdles
	Deficiencies in school education
	Lack of guidance

Theme 4 Overcoming hurdles	Financial constraints
	Social and cultural differences and their resolution
	Preparations for employment - Employability skills acquired
	Challenges in getting employed
Theme 5 Current cultural status	Educational qualifications
	Proficiency in English
	Changes in lifestyle
Theme 6 Current socio-economic status	Friends and work environment
	Economic status of the first generation learners
	Economic status of the family
	Future plans

Table 3 - Final Themes

Source – Author’s own work

Step 6 - Write-up

This was the end-point or conclusion of the research. I analyzed each of the themes and sub-themes and discussed in detail the interpretation that could be drawn under each head. A qualitative phenomenological framework underpinned my analysis. Then I discussed the answers for my six secondary research questions based on the interpretations drawn from the themes. From these findings, I was able to construe the answer for my overarching primary research question. These answers provided me the foundation for drawing up some modest recommendations for policy making, which would help to bridge the economic gap in India.

Access Issues

Firstly, I got the permission from our institution for conducting my study on the alumni of our institution and for using the assistance of our institution Alumni Officer and Administrative Officer. A consent letter from our institution, signed by the Administrative Officer was obtained. Since all the alumni who participated in my study had graduated from our institution five years earlier and had no stake in our institution, their participation was totally voluntary. Prior signed consent was obtained from them for recording their interview and storing the transcribed and translated interview via the Participant Consent form. So there were no issues associated with recording their interview and storing the transcribed and translated interviews. This arrangement had the written consent of our institution and the participants and hence there was no access issues.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical issues come up at every stage of research work – formulating the research question, data collection and analysis and the way the results are reported. A researcher has to necessarily strike a right balance between being a professional researcher in pursuit of truth and ensuring that their subjects' values and rights are upheld. This was one of the major ethical dilemmas that a researcher would face. This has been termed as the 'costs/benefits ratio' (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 75).

The primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews from alumni, who had graduated from our institution in 2012. They had no stake in our institution and their involvement was totally voluntary. Therefore, there was no possibility for coercion in the recruitment process. So my only ethical issue was whether the first-generation graduates would feel comfortable if they knew that their cultural, social and economic status is being 'researched'. But their responses would provide me a better insight into their life before joining our institution, their experiences in our institution and the impact of this in their profession. As the head of our institution this understanding would help to formulate educational and administrative policies that would better serve this population in future. So this research would be of great benefit to first-generation learners like them. This was clearly communicated to them. Hence in the 'costs/benefits ratio', the benefits in my research will far exceed the costs.

I would like to list out how the primary data was collected with due ethical consideration. The primary data I collected was from 13 alumni of our institution, who had been admitted under the Rural Scholarship Scheme in 2008. These alumni had completed the undergraduate engineering program at our institution. The Participant Information Sheet detailing the study and its purpose, along with the Participant Consent form was emailed to them. It was clearly conveyed to them that their anonymity would be maintained and also that their participation would be totally voluntary. The Alumni Officer

fixed the time for the interview – a few in person and few over telephone. Their interviews were recorded, transcribed and translated. After this the transcribed and translated interviews were stored in a password protected space. In this manner the anonymity of the participant was ensured.

Practice based Research

Stake (1995, p. 95) has advised that, 'Research is not helped by making it appear value free. It is better to give the reader a good look at the researcher' (p. 95). I will follow his recommendation and share with my readers my background and the reason I have taken up this research on first generation learners.

Our institution, in which I work at as President since its inception in 1996, is a private self-financed engineering school. It is a philanthropic venture, focused on providing inclusive and equitable education. Our institution offers undergraduate and postgraduate programs in engineering. Since my study is on first generation learners, I will focus on the first generation learners from rural areas, enrolled in our undergraduate engineering programs. In our institution around 30% of around 3600 students enrolled in undergraduate engineering programs are first generation learners.

Our institution is a well reputed engineering school in Tamil Nadu and there is always a huge demand for getting admission in our institution. We prided ourselves for making the admissions transparent and merit-oriented.

Once I visited a rural government school in an educationally challenged rural area as a part of our social service initiative. I was shocked to hear that only 3% of their students pursued higher education after completing their twelfth standard. The twelfth standard students did not have teachers for Math, Physics and Chemistry, since the school was in a remote area and no teacher was willing to join that school. The students studied all these subjects on their own. The highest mark scored in that school was much, much lower than the lowest mark for admission into our institution. This was an eye-opener for me and I understood that these students cannot be directly compared with the more privileged urban students who had access to much better quality teachers and supportive parents. In addition, I also found that even if we offered admission to them in our institution, they would not be able to accept it because of their financial constraints. The medium of instruction in that school was Tamil and the students had extremely poor knowledge of English. So in 2008, I created the Rural Scholarship Scheme to provide admission and complete scholarship to 20 students from economically weaker strata, who stood first in their twelfth standard exams in their respective rural government schools. From my interaction with these students, I also understood that we had to design special initiatives for them to supplement the regular classes. So we designed a special supplementary curriculum, which complemented the regular curriculum for four years of undergraduate studies. The

supplementary curriculum considered the various dimensions of the challenges that a first generation learner might face in completing the degree program successfully and also in getting gainfully recruited. Though we had specially designed this supplementary curriculum for them, there was no analysis done on how and in what way the rural, first generation learners perceived the various modules in this curriculum impacted them. This study will be very important to my profession, since it will provide motivation for similar first generation learners, at our institution in particular and also to others pursuing higher studies in other institutions, that they could also overcome the cultural and social barriers and succeed in life.

As Trochim (2006) has posited, most of the research questions originate from the social problems we encounter in our profession. This is very true in my case. I had tried to provide a solution to the first generation learners at our institution to overcome their social and cultural barriers and succeed in life. But the very fact that I am closely associated with the creation of the specially designed supplementary curriculum has a negative side as well. Connolly (2003) has stated that 'researchers should be committed to the unbiased and objective pursuit of knowledge.' (p.7). Moreover, as Hammersley (2000) states, the research should be value-neutral. Right from framing our research questions, we have to avoid making evaluative assumptions. We have to ensure that we practice ethical reflexivity at every stage of our research. I agree with Greenbank's (2003)

views that educational researchers have a tendency to allow their political and educational beliefs to influence not only what they research, but also the research process and their conclusions. I am worried whether my research about the curriculum, the designing of which I was part of, would be truly unbiased and value-neutral.

Irrespective of this uncertainty, it is our commitment to understand the lived experiences of this section of the society, namely the first generation learners. Moore, Sanders & Higham (2013) have recommended that, 'Approaches to research should aim at bringing together academic research and practitioner-led initiatives' (p. 138). This is what I have done and this research will be of great relevance to my profession.

Validation

Anderson and Herr (1999) have spoken of five classifications of validity, namely outcome validity, process validity, democratic validity, catalytic validity and dialogic validity. Outcome validity refers to the extent to which the outcomes of the research match the intended purposes of the research. Process validity focuses on the much debated problem of what 'counts as "evidence" to sustain assertions' (p. 16). Democratic validity is concerned with 'the extent to which research is done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation' (p. 16). Catalytic validity refers to the ability of the research process to transform the participants, deepen the understanding of the participants, and motivate

participants to further social action. Dialogic validity is similar to the peer review process or having critical friends.

In this study I have tried to suggest a method for bridging economic inequality in India. For this purpose, on a smaller scale I have analyzed the effectiveness of a specially designed supplementary curriculum in uplifting the economic status of the participants, who were first generation learners. Anderman (2009) has stated that if subsequent to any intervention, there are measurable differences that did not exist prior to the intervention, then it is logical to conclude that the intervention was effective. My study analyses from the first generation learners' interviews how the specially designed supplementary curriculum was effective in considerably enhancing the economic status of the participants. In their cases economic inequality had been bridged. So the outcome validity is achieved. In addition, my study dealt with investigating how the specially designed curriculum worked on first generation learners. My participants were all first generation learners, who are the major stake holders of my study. Though the numbers are small, I can say that the democratic validity is also satisfied to a certain extent.

Hence my study satisfied outcome validity and democratic validity to a certain extent.

In the next chapter I will report the results from the semi-structured interviews held with the 13 participants of this study, clubbed under the final themes identified in Table 3.

Chapter 5

Results

Introduction

In this section, I report the results from 13 semi-structured interviews with first generation learners, who graduated in 2012. Seven of them were male and six of them were female. Three of the interviews were conducted in person and the rest over telephone. Each interview lasted between 60 minutes to 90 minutes. The interviews were conducted in Tamil, the regional language, so that the participants will be more comfortable in voicing their feelings and their lived experienced. The interview questions were based on the open-ended lead questions in the Interview Guide I had prepared, which is given in Appendix. The questions aimed at capturing the three phases of the lives of the first generation learners - before joining our institution, at our institution and after graduating from our institution. All the interviews were audio recorded. They were then transcribed verbatim in Tamil and then translated to English. As mentioned in my Data Analysis section, I used the Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phase framework for conducting the analysis, underpinned by phenomenology.

In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, the seven male participants are named M1, M2..., M7 and the six female participants are named F1, F2..., F6. I have given below the results of the interviews clubbed under the six themes and sub-themes mentioned in Table 3.

Themes

Theme 1 Socio-economic background

- a) Social beliefs and norms of people in the first generation learners' villages

There was a lot of apprehensions and misconceptions in the villagers' minds regarding higher education. Most of them felt that whether one studied or not, he/she will end up in the village, be daily wage labourers or get married. This was evident from the following statement:

"My village was typically one where village elders believed that irrespective of education imparted to their children, they would end up doing the same menial work as a daily wage labourer, weaver, farmer etc."

M1

Villagers' attitude towards girls was conservative. They believed that higher education was pointless, especially for girls. They felt that they should responsibly control the destiny of the youngsters in their village. The following statements depict this:

"In my village, most of the elders had a narrow mind-set towards girls; they firmly believed that girls should not go for higher education since ultimately they were going to get married after completing their schooling."

F4

"Once a girl is 18 years old, she has to get married and thereafter take care of her husband and children. Girls in my age group were married off after completing their school education up to twelfth standard. My relatives tried to brainwash my parents to get me married and not send me for higher education, but fortunately my parents wanted me to study further."

F2

Villagers also believed that sending their daughter to a city for higher education was not desirable since she might get adversely influenced by the modern culture prevalent there.

"In villages parents will not send their daughter to a town or city to pursue higher studies in better colleges because they felt that the culture prevailing in those colleges would not be conducive for their daughter and she might get spoilt."

M7

b) Ambitions of friends, relatives and villagers

Most of the participants' friends, relatives and the villagers were not very ambitious. They were ignorant of the need and value of higher education.

"People in my village are not much educated. Only few people had gone to schools. Friends and relatives in and around my village were like that only, with no desire for education."

M1

One trend, which was of concern, in one of the villages was that most youths had discontinued their studies after completing their schooling up to the twelfth standard and opted to work as construction workers or in Gulf countries.

“99% of the youngsters in my village after completing twelfth grade work for less than Rs.10000 per month in construction sites or work in Gulf countries. None of the students in my village during my time had gone for higher studies. If I hadn’t done well during my schooling, I would have followed the same way.”

M4

“Family members and my relatives were not educated. Very few children of my age group among my relatives went for higher studies”.

F4

The female participants of my study had to overcome their villagers’ and their relatives’ reluctance towards allowing girls to pursue higher education. They voiced their concern about this attitude.

“I wanted to prove to my relatives and society that a girl child is not for just getting married and taking care of her children and husband; she can do much more than that”.

F2

Lastly, the belief of 'protecting' a girl before marriage versus need for good education was aptly summed up by F5:

"My relatives let their daughters study, but admitted them in the nearby college and did not allow them to move out of our village to study in better colleges in other cities"

c) Family's financial position

The annual household income was barely at sustenance level in most cases. Supply of rice and grains from crops harvested might have enabled them to survive. Among the 13 first generation learners, M2 belonged to the lowest income family and F5 had the highest family income. In some cases, the family had to survive with meagre earnings below sustenance level and with no agricultural produce.

"Family annual income was Rs.16000/- to 17000/-. We had a small house that my father got from my grandfather"

M2

"Annual income Rs. 50,000/- to Rs.60, 000/-. We had one acre of land and small hut. We had a mixer-grinder."

F5

"When I was 5 years old, my father got married to another woman. Thereafter, my mother was staying with my grandmother. My mother is a tailor and my grandmother is a cook in a government elementary school. My mother earned Rs.1000 /- to Rs. 2000 /- per month"

M4

“Mother earned Rs 1500 to 2000 per month from agriculture daily wage work. My father broke his back and leg in an accident so my mother’s earning was the only source of our family’s income”

M5

In another case a single mother could not earn since she was physically challenged. The family was supported by a foster grandfather, a retired school headmaster who looked after the family.

“We did not have any income as my mother was physically challenged and my father left my mother and ran away when I was a child. We lived under the shelter of my foster grandfather who was getting pension of Rs 15,000 per month”

M3

Assets owned by the 13 families and source of these assets are tabulated below. The assets that were considered were land, property of value (like houses, farm animals and trees that generate income), valuable jewelry, four wheelers, two wheelers and electronic appliances.

Name	Family assets	Source of assets
M1	Nil	Not applicable
M2	Small hut	Grandfather

M3	Nil	Not applicable
M4	Nil	Not applicable
M5	Nil	Not applicable
M6	Hut, old black and white TV	Grandfather
M7	2.5 acres agricultural land	Grandfather
F1	Hut	Own
F2	Nil	Not applicable
F3	Nil	Not applicable
F4	Nil	Not applicable
F5	1 acre agricultural land, small hut, mixer and grinder, 1 two-wheeler	Own
F6	2 acres of agricultural land, some coconut trees, small hut	Own

Table 4 - Assets owned by Family

Source – Author’s own work

d) Motivators

In spite of the fact that most of the parents were not educated, a common phenomenon observed was parental (and grandparents) support and motivation towards their children pursuing higher education. This might have been particular to the participants of this study, since each of them stood first in their respective schools and there should have been some motivation for them to have achieved this. This might have been fueled by their pecuniary condition, the poor quality of life that they had experienced

and a realization that the only way out of this financial crisis was for their children to pursue higher education.

“Father told us that we should not suffer like them in life”

M1

“My foster grandfather was a retired school headmaster. He used to encourage me by telling the story of his son who had struggled and worked hard to pursue higher education. I was motivated to pursue higher studies by my foster grandfather. People in my village respected him and that inspired me a lot to pursue higher education.”

M3

Many persons, including their higher secondary teachers, who were not relatives also helped, motivated and guided the first generation learners to pursue higher education. Their higher secondary teachers had helped in many ways – guidance, accompanying the student to our institution, continuous monitoring of their studies and in a few cases, paying high-school fees on behalf of the student from their earnings.

“English teacher encouraged me. He accompanied me during our institution interview. The very thought that anyone with hard work can achieve, motivated me to pursue higher education”

M4

"I scored well in Math in school, which motivated me to pursue engineering. My physics and chemistry teachers also encouraged me to pursue engineering"

M5

"My teacher was my role model. He used to monitor me continuously at school. His motivation helped me a lot."

M7

"I was the first rank holder in my class in school. After seeing this performance, my teachers motivated me by asking my parents to allow me to pursue higher education. My teachers and my family members were encouraging me all the time"

F1

"My teachers paid my school fees and my parents motivated me by saying - you don't worry, we will borrow money from someone for your higher studies"

F3

"A strong support was given by my brother. He himself was very much interested in studying but because of my family's financial constraints he was not able to study further, so he wanted me to study. Without my brother's support I couldn't have reached this position."

F6

Theme 2 Cultural background

a) Education and livelihood of family

The education levels and the livelihood of the family members of the 13 first generation learners are tabulated below:

First generation learner	Family education	Family livelihood
M1	Parents did not attend school; unable to read and write. Sister studied up to 10 th standard and then got married	Farming daily wage labourer
M2	Father was a 3 rd standard dropout and mother studied up to 5 th standard	Father was mentally ill and mother was a weaver
M3	Single mother mute and deaf and did not attend school	Foster grandfather was a retired school teacher took care of the family
M4	Mother did not go to school	Mother was a tailor
M5	Father studied till 3 rd standard and mother did not go to school. Brother discontinued his studies after 9 th standard	Farming daily wage labourer
M6	Father studied upto twelfth standard and mother had studies up to 5 th standard. Sister was studying in 10 th standard	Weaver
M7	Parents did not attend school. Two sisters were studying in school	Farming daily wage labourer
F1	Parents did not attend school. First two sisters studied up to 6 th standard and discontinued; third sister studied up to 10 th standard	Farming daily wage labourer
F2	Parents did not attend school	Farming daily wage labourer

F3	Parents did not attend school	Farming labourer	daily	wage
F4	Parents did not attend school, brother was going to school	Carpenter		
F5	Parents did not attend school. Younger sister was studying in school	Farming labourer	daily	wage
F6	Father did not attend school; mother studied up to 7 th standard. Elder brother had studied up to twelfth standard and discontinued. Sister was studying in school	Farming labourer	daily	wage

Table 5 – Education and Livelihood of Family

Source – Author’s own work

b) Proficiency in English language

None of the first generation learners could speak even 5 lines continuously in English. They had to write one English language paper in their twelfth examinations. But even for this course, the English classes were conducted in Tamil (regional language). There was a total ignorance of the importance of English not only among the students but also their teachers. The following statements reveal the abject condition of English teaching in village schools:

“We did not have a separate English teacher in my school and I did not know the importance of English at that time. I was unable to speak continuously two or three sentences together. I had very poor communication skills in English.”

M1

“To be frank, my reading, writing and speaking skills were zero. I used to write English by memorizing sections in the textbook. I was not able to speak or write without making grammatical mistakes.”

M2

“I was not able to speak even five lines in English at the time of joining our institution. I was asked to tell about my father, my classroom experiences and so on during my interview. Even though I knew the answer I wasn’t able to communicate.”

M3

“I did not have any problem in reading and writing in English. However, in terms of speaking in English, I was unable to do that back then.”

M6

“I was very poor in English since I had studied in a government school where we used to memorize and write the exams. Nobody told us about the importance of this language at that time in my school. I did not know the value of English language. Before joining our institution my world was very small. I read English but I did not know its meaning and my speaking skill was very poor.”

F1

“I could only read the English textbook. Writing and speaking on my own was not possible. At the time of my interview at our institution I

was asked to speak about my school in English, but I could not speak at all.”

F2

“I knew to read and write English. Whenever I touch my English book I will keep English to Tamil translation dictionary near me. That’s how I completed by school life.”

F3

“I was able to read and write in English comfortably but when it came to speaking, I was at a lower level.”

F4

“I was able to understand the meaning of English words and sentences but I wasn’t able to speak and write English fluently, that is, without grammatical errors.”

F5

“My English speaking skill was poor. I was somewhat okay with reading but I wasn’t able to write in my own words in English. Since I did not get any guidance to nurture my English proficiency, I wasn’t able to acquire good language skills in English.”

F6

c) Exposure to life beyond their village

Out of the 13 rural, first generation learners interviewed only four had stepped out of their village to travel to a city before joining our institution.

“I started working at a Garment factory in Thirupur.”

M2

“I once came to my distant relative’s family function at Chennai. I travelled one or two times to the nearby town Kancheepuram which is 10 km away from my village.”

M1

“Throughout my school days I visited Vellore and Thiruvannamalai twice and Thiruppathi temple once. Though Chennai is only 100 km from Vellore, I did not get a chance to visit Chennai.”

M7

“Before joining our institution I had never gone to any city or town except Vellore.”

F6

“I had not visited Chennai before my visit to our institution.”

F5

“When I came to Chennai to attend our institution’s interview, it was the first time I came out of my village.”

M4

“People in my village had never travelled to big towns and cities.”

F4

d) Aspirations

Determination and the desire to achieve something are important characteristics for a person who aspires to succeed in life. In the case of the participants of my study, this desire was very strong because of their poor socio-economic background. They longed to help their family rise from their socio-economic pit. In addition, some of them wanted to prove the benefits of higher education to the villagers and be a role model to the other students in their village.

“My aspiration was to become an engineer, earn, and support my family.”

M1

“At that time my family was in a pretty bad condition and therefore, my desire was to study well and get any job which pays well so that I could support my family”.

M2

“I had suffered because of a doubt whether I could pursue my higher studies and therefore could not dream big. I have intentions to help students who are similarly struggling like me to pursue higher education.”

M3

“I wished to be the first graduate in my family and I wanted to motivate my younger brother too to pursue higher education. I wanted

to be a role model for people in my village. In addition, I wanted to make my parents happy.”

F4

“My aspiration was to get a job in a good company and to earn money for my family.”

F5

All the rural, first generation learners uniformly said that they had no career guidance and though they were self-motivated, they were clueless about what they should aim for and how they could pursue higher education.

“In our village school there was no technical education and there was no one to guide me on my career. Accordingly, since I was not aware of higher education and its benefits, I had no aspiration at that time except a motivation to do my studies sincerely and devotedly”.

M4

“My aspiration was to pursue higher education and thereafter get a good job but I didn’t know what to study and what kind of a job I could get, because I did not have proper guidance”.

F1

“I wanted to support my family financially. For that, I wanted to study and have a good career. I wanted to live a good life which my relatives would see because they were the ones who were asking my parents to

stop me from studies. I wanted to prove to my relatives and society that a girl child is not just for getting married and taking care of her child and husband; she can do much more than this. I wanted to achieve something in life but at that time I did not have clear idea about what to achieve”.

F2

“There was no internet facility in our village and there were no experienced people to guide or motivate us after our schooling. There were many engineering colleges in Tamil Nadu but we were very confused about which would be the best for us. Since my mathematics teacher was fond of me because of my school results, I wanted to become a mathematics teacher like him”.

M5

Theme 3 Challenges in the journey towards entering higher education

The major challenges towards entering higher education were social hurdles, deficiencies in school education, financial constraints and lack of guidance. These have been dealt with separately below.

a) Social Hurdles

Some villagers believed that sending their daughter to a town or city for higher education was not desirable since she might get adversely influenced by the culture prevalent there. The mind-set of some villagers

was conservative as far as a girl child's education was concerned. They believed that once a girl attained 18 years of age, she should be married and take care of her husband and children. These notions are quite clearly evident from the following statements:

"In villages people will not send a girl to town to pursue higher studies because she might get spoilt. My sister was a good student but because she was not able to go out of our village she could not pursue higher education."

M7

"In my village the mind-set of my friends and relatives was different. They firmly believed that once a girl attained 18 years of age, she has to get married and after that she has to take care of her husband and children. Girls in my age group got married after completing their twelfth standard".

F2

b) Deficiencies in school education

- ✓ Lack of English language proficiency: This was true even for the English teachers in the villages. This percolated down to the students.

"Even though I stood first in 10th and twelfth standards in my school, we did not have enough money to pay the tuition fees for higher studies. I studied in Tamil medium in government school in my village,

so I was apprehensive about English. Therefore, my main challenges were money and English language.”

M1

“I was able to read but I was not able to communicate properly since there were no knowledgeable teachers for English and Math in my school”

M5

Surprisingly, English was also taught in Tamil in many village schools.

“In my village school they taught me English in Tamil. I was not good at speaking in English, I could say only good morning and good evening. But I knew how to read and write English”

M2

- ✓ Non-availability of teachers: The village schools had inadequate teachers, since many of the government appointed teachers preferred teaching in an urban government school and avoided going to a rural government school. So in many of the village schools, there was no teacher for many subjects and the students had to learn these subjects on their own. Moreover, even if there was a teacher available for a subject, each class had a huge number of students and there was no individual attention given to any of the students.

“For most of the subjects, teachers were not available. During my twelfth, we did not have a teacher for mathematics and we studied on our own. In my school there were more than 100 students in my class”

F1

c) Lack of guidance

Except for a few cases, absence of guidance was a major problem which was what some first generation learners conveyed:

“There were no experienced people to guide or motivate us after our schooling”

M5

“I didn’t know to how speak in English, didn’t know whom to contact and where to apply for higher education”

F3

“Next barrier was the unavailability of educated well-wisher and guide”

F5

However, there were a few who were more fortunate because of help extended by some teachers:

“The Math teacher in my school during my 7th grade motivated me to pursue engineering. My physics and chemistry teachers also encouraged me to pursue engineering”

M5

Theme 4 Overcoming hurdles

Entering a higher education institution was a huge leap for the first generation learners. I have listed below the hurdles they faced during their four years of undergraduate education and what helped them to overcome these difficulties.

a) Financial constraints

The first stumbling block for all the first generation learners was financial constraints. They had no means to pay for their higher education.

“We did not have enough money to pay the tuition fees for higher studies”

M1

“Main challenge was money because we never had any. I was apprehensive about what kind of career I would have. I started working at a Garment factory in Thirupur. Even though I knew that I could not afford higher education, I applied to few arts college and State University (Anna University), hoping that some miracle would happen”

M2

“Financial problem was the biggest challenge”

M7

“After having scored high marks in school my only problem was lack of monetary support; there was no one to help me financially for my

higher studies. No one was ready to give me monetary support for my higher studies”

F4

The financial constraint was overcome by the 100% scholarship provided by our institution for their studies and living expenses under the Rural Scholarship Scheme.

b) Social and cultural differences and their resolution

There was a lot of awe and apprehension for the first generation learners on entering our institution.

“Felt like moving from one planet to another, infrastructure and campus were awesome”

M1

“There were like 50 yellow coloured college buses and so many cool buildings that I was in awe and amazed by the way the campus and the infrastructure looked”

M2

“Environment and ambience was very different; there was fear in my mind. Meeting students like me from different villages gave me a feeling of comfort”

M1

“Scared on how I was going to stay here, how I’m going to tackle my peers. They would be from city and I was from village”

F4

Cultural differences were there in many aspects. Differences in ability to communicate, grooming, personality and lack of confidence initially had a negative impact resulting in low self-esteem for some of the participants:

“Lot of cultural difference between my village and our institution.

Initially I could not easily mingle with others because of poor English speaking skills”

M3

“Students moving around in the college were looking very bright and smart compared to me by appearance”.

F2

In the villages the first generation learners were prohibited from talking freely with members of the other sex. This was another change they found in our institution.

“I was from a small village and here my world was very big. I had to mingle with other students without any gender bias”

F1

“Major difference I found was the friendship between boys and girls. Though I had studied in a co-education school, I was not allowed to talk to boys in my school”

F5

“Friendship between boys and girls was something I had never seen”.

F6

In many villages, even the basic amenities were not there.

“In my village, there was no electricity, but our institution provided me with a free laptop and Wi-Fi facility”.

M4

Many of the non-first generation learners were from well to do families and were accustomed to weekend outings. This was an unknown luxury for the first generation learners.

“Students in my class used to go for outings during every weekend - to watch movies and go to the beach. I did not accompany them since I needed money which I did not have”

M7

“Students were from wealthy background and their parents were well educated”

F1

“I wondered if I could survive here because the students here were very modern. However, once I started interacting with them I found that they were very approachable”

M4

Culturally the urban students in our institution and the rural students were far apart.

“Major differences in the mentality of the village people and urban students”

F2

Many of the first generation learners said that the orientation course and the mentorship offered by faculty helped them overcome the cultural hurdles. During the three-week orientation course, the students were taught etiquette and were familiarized with the new environment.

“If we had attended the regular classes without going through the orientation course, then our college life would have been difficult. We spent three weeks in the college campus and learnt etiquette, English and we also became more comfortable with the surroundings”.

F5

“All the faculty members helped us a lot. They were very caring and they motivated us in every step and brought us to a higher level”.

M4

“In the orientation course they used to motivate us by telling us - you can do this because you have already proved that you can achieve by being the first rank holder in your school in twelfth standard. English is only a language or tool to communicate, it is not knowledge. These kind of motivating words gave us lot of confidence. Really, we need to thank a lot for the orientation course, because that course boosted our confidence”.

F1

One of the major hurdles was English communication skills. Difficulty in communicating with other students, especially with students from non-Tamil speaking states, understanding the classes, which were conducted in English, asking doubts were some of the problems mentioned by the first generation learners:

“Initially I could not easily mingle with others because of poor English speaking skills”

M3

“Urban students used to ask their doubts without any hesitation. But I was unable to clarify my doubts”

F5

“On the first day of college I could not understand any of the classes conducted the whole day”

M1

“The initial difficulty was the language spoken, that is, English. I had studied in school in Tamil medium and therefore when suddenly in college I was expected to read and write exams in English and converse with others in English, it was very difficult. When we came to know from some faculty members that they too had faced similar problems but overcome them, it comforted me”

M6

“Hesitated to speak with peers and faculty due to my fear of not being comfortable with English; my mind was refusing to overcome this”

F1

“In my first year I did not mingle with the other students and hesitated to talk to faculty members. Even if I had a doubt, I would not ask them because of the communication gap”

F2

“First three months I wasn’t able to communicate with others with full confidence”

F6

“City students interacted very fluently in English, but I was not able to interact like them. It was a major roadblock in the first semester but I overcame this by referring to dictionaries and meeting faculty after the classes”.

M5

The first generation learners opined that the orientation course laid a good foundation for them to overcome the communication difficulties.

“If our institution had not conducted the orientation course then it would have been a challenge for us to survive at our institution. This was helpful in developing our communication skills, reading skills,

general knowledge and story writing skills. It helped us improve our creativity”

F6

“The course actually gave me confidence and showed ways to improve on our own; it had direct impact on my communication with friends and faculties in English. Without this course, we would have struggled a lot and this could have really broken our confidence within weeks into the classes”.

M6

“I was so afraid to study engineering in English. The orientation course was helpful. It helped me to frame sentences while speaking and boosted my confidence to speak”

M2

“It helped my English learning, though it did not completely improve my speaking skills. The speaking, reading and writing skills comparatively improved”.

M4

“The three weeks orientation course helped me to try and speak in English. It built my confidence. I could understand what others were saying, even though I could not fluently speak in English. After some time I could speak in English”

M3

The foundation created for English during the orientation course was followed by special English coaching classes throughout the first year. These special classes aimed at reinforcing the initial language classes of the orientation module. The first generation learners benefited from these classes as well.

Unlike the orientation module, the sole focus of the special English class was on the following aspects:

- Helping first generation learners to interact with students from diverse cultures:

“English faculty asked us to interact in English within ourselves (Tamil medium students). In addition to that a discussion with non-Tamil medium students was arranged. That helped us to speak with students from North India and other states and helped us to interact with other departments’ students also. We could answer questions in the classroom.”

M1

“The orientation course was only for us and therefore we did not face any problem in communicating with each other. But that was not the case when the regular classes started. Since the urban students were from some famous schools, I wasn’t even able to open my mouth. I felt very self-conscious to speak with them. In addition to this my immediate front and rear roll number students were from Andhra

Pradesh (another state). Compulsorily I had to talk to them only in English; I did not have any other option in the lab sessions. To face these problems and also to communicate bravely with others the additional English classes helped me a lot.”

F6

- Helping them to develop self-confidence:

“In addition to the orientation course, the additional English classes helped me to develop self-confidence.”

M7

“Orientation course gave very basic knowledge for speaking and writing in English whereas additional special classes in English helped us with group discussions - to describe the character that we liked most and explain a place which we found to be exciting.”

F2

- Helping them to grasp the essentials of English language, so as to converse fluently and to follow conversations:

“It taught me how to follow the lecture classes in English and to understand. This was a major boost for us. This is when I learned to write in English in a simpler manner, to articulate what I was thinking, understand the lectures and the exam question papers. It taught basic structure of sentences in English and how to speak in English. We could understand the concept and learn English well.”

M2

“In Tamil, I used to study in school with a clear understanding of the subject. Since I was not good in English, I was unable to understand this subject and accordingly, I used to memorize the essential sections. The additional English classes stopped me from memorizing, made me understand and also taught me good English grammar.”

M3

“My fluency in speaking in English was average and the additional special classes helped me in achieving better fluency and proficiency in English”

M6

“The addition special classes in English was very useful, it helped to improve my communication and helped me to learn English grammar as well. This helped me to pass my engineering degree exams with first class.”

F1

“We had separate English coaching classes throughout our college days. It helped me in learning and understanding conversations in English. It helped me to speak English fluently”.

F4

The support from the faculty and other complementary initiatives by the management was also appreciated by the first generation learners.

“Our faculty were very kind. I appreciate their helping tendency and their way of speaking English in a very slow manner to make us understand. They made us comfortable enough to mingle with everyone. They helped us converse without any hesitation”

F3

“Teachers asked us individually whether we had doubts and they took classes for us separately”

M4

“One rural student was given a room to share with two more urban students, that trend helped us to mingle with them”,

M5

“Management helped us by allotting urban students from other departments as roommates in hostel”

M3

“I was scared to communicate in class. However, our peers and faculty members encouraged us to speak in English even if it was wrong. They understood us very well”.

F1

Appointment of faculty mentors for each first generation learner was yet another initiative by our institution. Mentors played a vital role in counselling the first generation learners, encouraging them to discuss their

problems and finding solutions for overcoming their difficulties. They extended psychological and emotional support.

“I could easily interact with him because he was a student friendly person”

M1

“I was able to understand the classroom lectures much better. Each of us had a mentor who was a faculty from our own department, who helped us with the subjects when we were lagging behind. Mentor gave us moral support”

M2

“Mentor helped me a lot in my overall development, in developing communication skills, understanding the lectures etc. He also told us about various career opportunities”

M3

“If mentors had not been arranged, then I would not have been able to develop myself to what I am today. He also helped me to pass in a subject during my seventh semester and he was my project guide as well”

M5

c) Preparations for employment - Employability skills acquired

i) Special coaching classes for academics

A basic criterion for getting employed is that the student should have passed in all the required subjects and completed their undergraduate degree. Here again the first generation learners face a problem since they had been used to rote learning in their school days. They had difficulty in understanding and applying the concepts taught in English. They opined that the special coaching classes for academics organised for them by our institution in the evenings were a great help to them in resolving this difficulty.

“Without good understanding of basic concepts, it is very difficult to be a successful engineer. The special classes in academics enabled me to understand the fundamental concepts of the academic subjects. Accordingly, I was able to complete my engineering education without much difficulty. I have been working in the IT sector for last five years; the way I learnt in the special classes in academics continues to help me in keeping abreast of the continuous global advancements in the information technology field.”

M3

“During class time, we could not understand fully and at the same time I could not ask the questions that I had wanted to. It was in the evening special classes where it was explained slowly and clearly in Tamil that we understood the basics of the subjects. Faculty tuned in with us and came down to our level and explained whatever we were

unable to understand. All of this helped us to prepare for the exam and perform well”

M3

“It was difficult for me follow the lectures in English in the class and it was difficult to understand the concepts. Without the special classes, I would have failed in many subjects in my first semester. In the special classes we were taught both in English and in Tamil. I understood the concepts and started learning and writing in English.”

M2

In some cases, mentors and self-motivation helped to resolve the issues.

“Though I had some difficulties in understanding the technical terms in English, slowly I was able to understand the lecture completely by referring to a dictionary. For first three to four months I could not understand anything; I used to ask others to help me. I faced some difficulties in the initial stage to interact with my peers and faculties. I overcame these obstacles with the support of my mentor. Actually, mentor was our backbone.”

M3

Within the 4 years of undergraduate studies, it was necessary for the first generation learners to acquire employability skills such as proficiency in English, self-confidence and the ability to connect and cooperate with others. There were various initiatives designed to groom the first generation

learners and help them in acquiring the required employability skills. Extra-curricular activities and special placement training were specifically mentioned as being useful by the first generation learners.

ii) Extra-curricular activities

Effective participation in these activities helped develop various skills such as team management, leadership quality and organizational skills:

“I conducted one activity in my department symposium called Crankx. I organized an event called Modelling in the symposium. It helped me to learn team management. With that experience now I manage the team in my office. In addition to this I was in National Social Service and two times went for a camp to nearby villages.”

M1

“When I was in the second year of my Engineering course, I joined National Social Service as a member, since I had interest in doing social service from my school days itself. I had done lots of services through our institution. Because of my interest in social service, in my 3rd year I became the leader of the whole National Social Service team at our institution. It helped me to develop my leadership qualities and also boosted my confidence. I received the best National Social Service volunteer award.”

M3

Other traits such as self-discipline and self-confidence were also imbibed:

"I was a National Social Service member. We had National Social Service camps in rural schools. In National Social Service, I learned self-discipline, how to help others and also about environment protection. This was where I realized that each one of us needed help from one another and even now I am always ready to lend a helping hand."

M2

"I was part of my department association and I was the Secretary of my Biomedical engineering department. It helped me improve my self-confidence. I interacted with outside faculty and guests."

F4

iii) Special placement training

Various capabilities acquired through the special placement training initiative were time management skills, presentation skills, handling group discussion and aptitude test, thinking and problem solving capabilities, quantitative analysis, reasoning analysis and advanced vocabulary. The feedback about the preparatory sessions conducted for honing each of these skills is given below:

"Before the placement training classes, we were not aware of the type of question that would be asked in an interview. This training taught us the type of questions which may be asked in the aptitude test, the

effective way of preparation and the time management skills. This training was an eye opener for us.”

M3

“Learning to understand and speak in English is one thing. How you present yourself to the world in English is a completely different thing. When I had mock interview for the first time in our 6th semester, I could not talk or present myself. In the special placement training, I learned how to present myself, how to understand what a company is looking for and how to be composed during the placement interview.”

M2

Group discussion and aptitude test:

“The placement training classes helped us a lot to develop our personality and communication skills which are critically required for getting placed. They trained us in group discussion, completing the aptitude test on time, etc. During that training, we were taught how to face the interview, the protocols that should be followed during an interview and how to handle the questions”

M7

Thinking and problem solving capabilities:

“Our institution arranged placement training through an external vendor. It was very helpful for solving the aptitude questions. It

increased our thinking ability and problem solving capability. It was very helpful during the campus interview.”

F3

Quantitative analysis, reasoning analysis and advanced vocabulary:

“Starting from aptitude i.e. quantitative analysis, reasoning analysis and communication skill, training was conducted for everything during the course. We were trained on some sample interview questions. All of us were able to get recruited in reputed companies only because of the placement training. I was recruited by a very large IT firm.”

F4

Lastly, a very important skill, how to present oneself:

“It developed my skill to introduce myself to others. It taught us how to present ourselves professionally to others, how to clearly answer the interviewer i.e. Mock interviews were very helpful.”

M1

d) Challenges in getting employed

Many of the participants felt that the supplementary curriculum designed by our institution helped them overcome the hurdles in getting recruited on campus.

“Of course I faced a lot of problems in terms of facing the interview board but due to the training given by our institution for enhancing our employability skills, I got placed in the campus recruitment in a core

company of my domain. They shortlisted only 5 people out of 48 from the first round and after that they recruited only 2 persons. I was one among those two.”

M7

“Since I got a job offer in our institution campus recruitment drive, there were no big challenges that I faced in life for getting a job. When I left our institution, I had the confidence to face anything in life.”

F1

“Since I was placed in campus recruitment drive, I did not feel any barrier or difficulty. I want to thank our institution once again for my performance.”

F4

There were instances when despite their best efforts some first generation learners were not selected in the initial campus recruitment drive. The faculty and their peers offered moral support and motivated them to continue trying.

“I failed in my first two interviews. Next, a meeting was arranged with a senior faculty of our institution for the rural students who had not been placed. This senior faculty spoke to us and motivated us by saying ‘you can do’. In addition to this our staff members also encouraged us to do the placement interview well. Then in the third

placement interview, I was recruited by a large IT company. I was placed in my mechanical engineering design core area.”

M1

“I was not placed in the first two companies that came for campus recruitment. After this I was very upset. My close friends spoke to me and encouraged me by saying that ‘if not these two companies there are many more companies that will come with their requirement and you can do well there after your experience in these interviews’. After their motivation, I got placed in a large IT company.”

F2

“Whenever we go for campus interview the first round is aptitude test. Placement training in our institution helped me go to the next level of interviews. All my friends got placed in first 4 companies but I was the only one who was without a job. I was feeling depressed. One of my friends motivated me a lot and his motivation and energetic talk helped me. He suggested that I should meet the student counsellor. Her motivational talk increased my confidence level even more. The next day I went with an enthusiastic mindset for the interview. None of the companies had conducted 5 levels of interview like this company. I cleared all the 5 rounds and got my offer letter that day itself. The best thing was that I was the one who got the best offer among the 2012 batch of rural students”

Theme 5 Current cultural status

a) Educational qualifications of siblings

All the participants of this study had financial commitments and they had to stay in their salaried job. Hence they were unable to pursue graduate studies. In all the cases where they had a younger sibling(s), they helped them pursue their higher education.

“My brother has completed his B.E degree with my help. I am repaying the loan”

M4

“My younger sister has completed her MSc in biomedical science: I paid all her educational fees from my earnings”

M6

“My elder sister has completed diploma in teachers training and my younger sister has completed BSc (Math)”

M7

In some cases, apart from financially helping the sibling, guidance was also provided:

“My immediate younger sibling is one year younger to me. I could not help her at that time. My father supported her studies through loans. Now she is working in a small company. She could not repay the loan but I repaid that loan from my salary. My second sister is 8 years

younger than me, she got second rank from the government school and got admission in an engineering college and is studying in 3rd year now. I financially support her higher studies and give advice to her on what are the skill sets she has to develop.”

F2

In one case, although the siblings had got married the participant motivated and sponsored the siblings’ children’s education.

“All my siblings are elder to me. They did not complete their schooling. When I was doing my school studies all of them got married. I could not do anything for their studies. Now I am helping their children’s education.”

F1

b) Proficiency in English

The proficiency of the participants in English had improved quite a lot, since their business language was English.

“Communication is an important tool to survive in an IT company. Therefore, the communication skills that we developed in the four years at our institution helped me to survive here. I was transferred to another State where people could not speak Tamil, so automatically and quickly I started to develop communication skills in English since there was no other option.”

M5

c) Changes in lifestyle

In all cases there were distinct changes in lifestyle.

“I am a Design engineer working in a large IT company, staying in an apartment. New experiences and living style. In our house, we have LED TV, fridge, mixer, grinder etc. and other home appliances bought from my salary”

M1

“I have built a new house with all facilities and appliances with my own earnings. I now frequently go for movies, shopping etc.”

F5

“Now I am staying in the hostel only, but with all comforts like TV, fridge, AC, washing machine etc. My dressing sense, speaking skills and everything have changed a lot. I have become somewhat modern”

F6

“My company has given me quarters with all facilities including Air Conditioner. I am in a township residing with others who are from professional background. Lots of changes in my dressing sense and eating habits.”

M7

Theme 6 Current socio economic status

a) Friends and colleagues

The participants had come a long way since their village schooling days. They now had a diverse set of friends. Many of them were also in touch with their school friends. But their current lifestyle and taste had changed.

“I have friends working in a variety of jobs like software professions, engineers, government employees, teachers, entrepreneurs, weavers, and mechanics”

M2

“I did not find any cultural gap with my new urban friends in office”

F3

“I live in the typical metropolitan city environment. The society that I move around is working towards different goals in life. We discuss about self-improvements and investments for a better future”

M6

“I am moving around with an urban society. The culture, professionalism of these people is totally different from those in my native place”

F5

b) Economic status of the first generation learners

There was a noticeable change in the economic status of the first generation learners. Many of them had also acquired assets as listed below. The assets that were considered were land, property of value (like houses, farm animals and trees that generate income), valuable jewelry, four

wheelers and two wheelers. All of them had air-conditioners and other household appliances like fridge, microwave, mixer-grinder, etc.

Name	Annual Income (in thousands) Rs.	Assets acquired
M1	520	Nil
M2	700	Saved money to buy a house
M3	900	Bike, some jewels
M4	675	House
M5	670	Nil
M6	800	Nil
M7	775	1.3 acres of land, bore well
F1	655	Nil
F2	900	Renovated old house and constructed a concrete house with 3 rooms in ground floor
F3	550	Nil
F4	550	Land purchased to build house, home appliances
F5	1050	House, electronic appliances, vehicle
F6	925	House and jewels

Table 6 - Current Economic Status

Source – Author’s own work

c) Economic status of the family

It is interesting to note that all the first generation learners looked after the members of their family, financially assisted them and ensured that the

living condition of their family also improved. Many of the first generation learners, especially the girls wanted to ensure a financially secure life for their parents.

“If all of us get married, my parents should not suffer for their survival. Hence, I want to earn money and deposit a huge amount into my parent’s bank account. From the deposited money, they will get the monthly interest for life.”

F2

“Now my aim is to buy a house in Chennai on my own and to buy a car and to keep my parents happy and comfortable. I want to be like a son for them.”

F5

I have tabulated below the type of assistance extended by the first generation learners to their families:

Name	Who was looked after	Support extended
M1	Parents	Financial help
M2	Parents	Financial help; plans to buy a house
M3	Parents; cousin	Financial help; Financial help for cousin’s marriage
M4	Parents	Financial help
M5	Mother [father expired]	Financial help
M6	Parents; sister	Financial help; sister’s education expense

M7	Parents; sister	Financial help; paid the expenses for younger sister's marriage; repaid the loan father had taken for elder sister's marriage.
F1	Parents; siblings' children	Financial help; education expenses
F2	Parents	Financial help
F3	Parents	Financial help
F4	Parents	Financial help; purchased new vehicle for father
F5	Parents	Financial help
F6	Parents; sister	Financial help; repaid educational loan taken for sister; paying house rent for parents

Table 7 – Assistance to Family

Source – Author's own work

d) Future plans

With the exposure these first generation learners had, their plans for their future became more ambitious and their goals were set high.

"I want to be a technical project leader after 5 years of experience in my present employment. I should have strong software skills to be at a manager level."

F2

"Now I am the leader of a small team. But my aim is to develop some new tools and software and to become a manager of a big team. I also have an idea to try for a government job."

F7

"Within six to seven years from now, I want to start my own business. I want to pursue my MBA degree in financial management to theoretically learn about running a business. In 6 years, I will definitely start my business."

M3

"I would like to work and learn for the next 5 to 10 years across different verticals of the corporate sector. I aspire to run my own business in the future"

M6

It is interesting to note that since all of them had come up a long way, they were also keen to give back to the society.

"Be the best I can be in my career and keep learning and give back to the community."

M2

"My aspirations are to give back what society has given me. I want to help students from rural background to get the opportunities like me. I want to mentor those students about what would help them in their life."

M4

"To be frank, I want to leave this profession as soon as possible and do environmental pollution-free agricultural work. At least in 10 years,

I want to be a role model for others. I need to make some investment to do agriculture.”

M7

“I don’t have financial problems now. I am in a position to help students who are struggling for their studies. Already I am doing this and will continue to do so.”

F3

“I want to grow in my career and I want to give back to the society. I want to go to my village school and provide them information about the opportunities available for them to succeed in life.”

F4

Summary

In this chapter, the data collected through semi-structured interviews with the 13 participants were clubbed into some common themes and sub-themes, which their interviews had unveiled. These themes and sub-themes provided an insight into the cultural, social and economic capitals of the participants before they joined our institution, the hurdles they faced in the pursuing and completing higher education, the current cultural, social and economic capitals of not only the participants but also their families. This gave me a deep understanding of the participants’ lives and their emotional experiences. In short, this built the foundation for my phenomenological study. The next chapter will provide a detailed analysis of these themes

within the context of the six secondary research questions and the overarching primary research question that framed my study.

Chapter 6

Discussions

Introduction

One of the pressing problems in India is growing economic inequality (Desai et al., 2010; Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook, 2018). The role of education in reducing this inequality and promoting economic growth has been highlighted by many researchers (Tilak, 1994; Cain et al., 2014; Psacharopoulos & Woodhall, 1985). In contradiction, Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) states that education plays a vital role in abetting and aiding the reproduction of social inequality, which in turn results in economic inequality. Cultural capital and social capital are fungible and tied to economic capital. Bourdieu (1986) has posited the theory of cultural and social reproduction. Many research studies also concur with this theory (Desai et al., 2010; Werfhorst 2010; Barone 2006). The cultural and social reproduction will abet economic inequality. This vicious cycle extends a very pessimistic picture, which will not provide a solution for the problem of growing inequality in India. There are many researchers who felt that Bourdieu's theory was very cynical. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002) have stated that though normally cultural and social reproduction will be true, complementary measures could help in breaking this reproduction process.

My study explored what complementary measures the participants of this study felt could be effective in breaking the cycle of social, cultural and economic reproduction. The participants of this study were rural, first generation learners, who originated with lesser cultural, social capitals when compared to the non-first generation learners. Their economic capital was significantly less. They had all undergone a special supplementary curriculum designed by our institution. Since my aim was to comprehend the lived experiences of the first-generation graduates - the challenges they faced -I felt that the phenomenological approach would be most suitable for my study. Moreover, the phenomenological approach would be very effective for my study, since it provides the 'researchers the opportunity to put themselves in another person's shoes and to understand the subjective experiences of participants' (Sutton and Austin, 2015, p.226).

In this chapter I will first put forth the discussions for each one of my six secondary research questions and then the overarching primary research question, based on the results generated from the interviews with the participants of my study. I will investigate how effective the participants found the interventions designed by our institution in helping them handle the various challenges faced by a first generation learner and to what extent economic inequality was bridged. This will help me analyze if the participants of my study stand exceptions to Bourdieu's cultural and social reproduction.

Discussions on Secondary Research Questions

1. Based on Bourdieu's (1986) definition of cultural, social and economic capitals, what capitals did the rural, first generation learners bring upon admission to our institution?

The word 'capital' basically denotes an investment which gets accumulated over time. The capitals that the rural, first-generation learners bring to our institution are those that they acquired till they completed their schooling. They are capitals embodied in them through the years of their upbringing amongst their family, relatives, friends and the social and cultural norms prevailing in their village through practices and beliefs passed down across generations. I will examine the cultural, social and economic capitals of the rural, first-generation learners who participated in this study before they joined our institution, with reference to the sub-components of each of these capitals as defined by Bourdieu (1986), listed in Figure 3 in Chapter 2.

Cultural capital

According to Bourdieu (1986) cultural capital can exist in three forms – embodied state, objectified state and institutionalized state.

1. Embodied cultural capital

This form of capital is acquired over time and is dependent on the upbringing environment which includes family, relatives, friends and the

village environment. The first-generation learners interviewed for this study belonged to the lesser privileged class. Their parents belonged to the lower economic strata. In some cases, the single mother or foster grandparents had to earn for the family. Unlike the non-first generation learners, these students did not have the luxury of receiving educational guidance from their parents and others in the village. Ghosh (2014) has emphasized that the home environment of these students tends to be non-facilitating. As Terenzini (1995) has mentioned, the first-generation learners are lesser prepared in life skills than their peers, who are non-first-generation learners. This is true for the participants of this study. None of them had any exposure to people outside their villages. Ghosh (2014) has also mentioned that the home environment may even discourage educational and intellectual pursuits of the first generation learners. Priebe, Ross & Low (2008) state that they place a higher priority on working and earning for the family and lower priority on higher education. This may be true for the other first generation learners in the villages. However, this was not true for the participants of my study, since they were all first rank holders in their respective schools. Most of them were continuously motivated by their parents to study and do well in life.

“Most influential person in my life was my mother. She had faith in me and encouraged me every day to study and aspire towards higher education and then a good job which will lead to economic upliftment.

She always said that - in order to grow in life education is the most important thing"

M2

Bourdieu (1997) has included linguistic capital as a component of embodied cultural capital. For this study, as I have justified under the Linguistic Capital section in Chapter 3, I will consider the proficiency in English language, which is the medium of instruction in most of the higher education institutions in India and is also the business language, as basis for linguistic capital. The participants of my study studied in village schools where the medium of education was the regional language, Tamil. There was total ignorance about the importance of English language. Most of the English teachers were themselves not very conversant with the language. In many cases English was taught in Tamil. All students had to pass an English paper in their twelfth examinations. The participants achieved it by memorizing all the answers and just reproducing it without understanding. We can sum up that their lack of proficiency in English was due to the following reasons – no one to advice on the importance of English, inadequate method adopted to teach English and mediocre teachers for this subject in the village schools.

The participants lacked linguistic cultural capital when compared to the non-first generation learners. Other than an intense desire to succeed in life

and a supportive family, the first-generation learners had very limited embodied cultural capital.

2. Objectified cultural capital

All the participants of my study came from the lower economic strata. The assets owned by them are shown in Table 4 in the Results section. They did not possess any material objects such as instruments, paintings, books, etc. Hence I can conclude that the first-generation learners did not possess any objectified cultural capital.

3. Institutionalized cultural capital

This form of capital relates to the academic credentials or educational qualifications of the family members. The very definition of the first generation learners shows that none of their parents nor siblings possessed any significant academic distinctions. But all the participants had completed their twelfth grade in school. This was the institutionalized cultural capital that they possessed.

In short the rural, first-generation learners in my study possessed some embodied cultural capital in the form of motivation and family support and limited institutionalized cultural capital (since their parents and siblings had lower educational qualifications) before getting admitted in our institution.

Social capital

Singh (1989) has mentioned, in India, the first-generation learners invariably belonged to the lesser privileged caste and class. The participant of my study stand true to this statement. In addition, none of them had any exposure to life beyond their villages. They had no contact with anyone outside their village. They had very limited access to influential groups in society. The villagers rarely had opportunity or necessity to travel to big towns or cities.

As per the definition of measurement of social capital for my study given in the Introduction section, the participants of this study possessed inferior social capital before joining our institution when compared to the non-first generation learners.

Economic capital

As shown in the Results section, among the participants of this study, the maximum family income per annum was Rs 55,000 (approximately USD 790) and the minimum was Rs 17000 (approximately USD 250). This stands proof of Singh's (1989) statement that the first generation learners belong to the lower economic strata.

The livelihood of the parents of first-generation learners was in occupations such as farming, weaving, carpentry and tailoring. Most of them worked as daily wage labourers. In most cases the father was the bread

earner and mother was home maker. There were a few cases where the mother had to earn. Average annual income was barely at sustenance level in most cases. In one case the foster grandparent supported the family. As per Desai et al. (2010) they belonged to the lowest and next-to-lowest quintile of the economic strata.

From whichever angle one might view, the participant of my study originated from the lower economic strata. They possessed very less economic capital. Because of the underprivileged class and economic strata that they belonged to, the parents of the first-generation learners, who had very less exposure to life beyond their villages, had limited cultural, social and economic capital. But the family provided moral support to the participants of my study. These students therefore possessed some embodied cultural capital in the form of motivation and moral support, and education up to twelfth grade, which they brought upon admission to our institution.

2. What is the relevance of Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) with regards to the originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership of the rural, first generation learners, who had undergone the specially designed curriculum of our institution?

Bourdieu's (1986) has formulated the theory of cultural reproduction. This stated that a person with lesser cultural capital would have lesser

chances of enhancing his/her social capital, which would be a hindrance for increasing his/her economic capital, which in turn would get translated into lesser cultural capital for his/her descendants. Similarly, his theory of social reproduction stated that a person with lesser social capital would have lesser opportunities for increasing his/her economic capital, which would get translated into decrease in his/her cultural capital, which in turn would provide lesser chances for enhancing the social capital for his/her descendants. Werfhorst (2010), Barone (2006) Sullivan (2001) and De Graaf et al. (2000) have also supported Bourdieu's theory of cultural and social reproduction. They emphasized that the educational performance and aspirations of a child was greatly influenced by the parental education and also that the cultural capital crucially impacted one's occupational choices and outcomes. Though Coleman's (1988) views on social capital differed from Bourdieu's view, he had also concurred that social capital is important in educational attainments.

I would like to examine the relevance of Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) with regards to the originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership of the rural, first generation learners, who had undergone the specially designed supplementary curriculum of our institution.

In the discussion for my first research question, I had deliberated on the cultural, social and economic capitals of the first-generation learners who

participated in this study before they joined our institution, with reference to the sub-components of each of these capitals listed in Figure 3 in Chapter 2, which is based on Bourdieu's (1986) definition of these capitals. I had concluded that except for some embodied capital and institutionalized capital, they possessed very limited social and economic capital. These were the capitals with which they had originated.

In this discussion, I will take the same sub-components of each of these capitals and reflect on the variations in these capitals for the participants of this study from the time they entered our institution until five years after their graduation.

Cultural capital

1. Embodied cultural capital

Bourdieu (1986) has posited that the embodied capital is something one acquires over time and it cannot be communicated instantaneously. The participants of this study had some form of embodied capital, since they were encouraged by their family to pursue higher education and to succeed in life. However, they had no guidance about how this objective could be achieved. As Hsiao (1992) has stated the parents and the siblings of the first-generation learners had no experience or understanding about college education. Therefore, though they were morally supportive, functionally they could not help their wards. Though the embodied capital cannot be

communicated instantaneously, based on the reflections of the participants of this study, they had acquired more embodied capital during the nine years after they entered our institution (four years at our institution and five years after that). As Striplin (1999) has specified, at the initial stage at our institution the first-generation learners had to face the tension of balancing between two cultures – one culture embodied in them during their formative years in the village and the other culture that they face in the higher education settings. At the level of higher education, they go through the process of cultural acculturation from that of being a first generation student to that of other regular students. It becomes important to make them recognize and accept their dual role.

When the participants of this study first entered our institution, they felt overawed by the very different environment. They felt that the orientation course at our institution helped to acclimatize them to the new settings. At our institution, they were exposed to a diverse group of students from different economic strata. Their knowledge about the different cultures and lifestyles expanded. They opined that the mentorship program provided them with constant help and career guidance, which made them realize their potential and set their goals high.

Bourdieu (1997) has included linguistics skills as part of embodied capital. When these first generation learners entered our institution, they could hardly speak in English or even understand the language. During their

stay in our institution, they felt that the orientation course and the special English coaching classes helped them to overcome this deficiency and they could converse well enough to clear the recruitment interviews and get employed.

When these rural, first generation learners joined the workforce, they had a wider exposure to the outside world. The various training and orientation workshops conducted by their companies gave them a better understanding of their career path. Since English was the business language and they had to converse in this language with the other stakeholders, there was a marked improvement in their English communication skills. Many of them had changed the company they had initially joined. This showed that they were competent enough to scout for opportunities and decide on their career progression.

Bourdieu (1986) has referred to the embodied state as the dispositions of the body and mind, which is directly linked to what an individual knows and can do. The above discussions suggest that there was a noticeable improvement in the embodied cultural capital of the participants of this study.

2. Objectified cultural capital

Initially the participants of my study did not possess any objects of value and had nil objectified cultural capital. Once they started earning, they

were more concerned about taking care of their basic requirements and that of their families. They considered purchasing material objects such as instruments, paintings, etc., as an unwanted luxury. Therefore, the participants of this study still had no objectified cultural capital.

3. Institutionalized cultural capital

This referred to the educational qualifications. The participants of this study came in with limited institutionalized cultural capital when compared to the non-first generation learners, since their parents and siblings had lower educational qualifications. During their four years at our institution, they had special coaching classes to help them pass all their academic examinations. This helped them to complete their undergraduate engineering degree. Having completed the undergraduate engineering program of our institution, all the first-generation learners had acquired some institutionalized cultural capital. A few of them had helped to educate their sibling and relatives for undergraduate studies. However, with the time that was being taken up in employment and their commitment towards earning for their family, none of them was able to pursue further education. But since they had acquired an educational qualification – an undergraduate degree in engineering - I can say that there was an improvement in their institutionalized cultural capital.

Social capital

As per Bourdieu's (1986) theory of social reproduction, social capital played a vital role in preserving and reproducing class structures in the society. Jenkins (2002) had disagreed with this theory and had opined that we should consider that proper intervention could change this destiny.

The participants of my study support Jenkins' belief. Their social circle before joining our institution was very small, limited to the people within their village. Initially they had a lot of inhibition in interacting with their peers, especially those belonging to the opposite gender. They felt that the various specially designed intervention by our institution, like the orientation course, mentorship program, etc., helped them to overcome this reservation. Motivating them to participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities further encouraged them to interact freely with their peers from varied cultural, social and economic background. They opined that these activities also helped them to overcome their inhibition to interact with persons of the opposite sex.

After graduating from our institution, as per the perception of the participants of this study, their social circle underwent a remarkable change. They had more opportunities to move with the urban crowd and influential people. Their residences were located in urban districts which brought with it neighbours and friends from a higher social status. There were noticeable social behavioural changes as well since the time they entered our institution. Taking into account my definition for measurement of social

capital, I can say that there was a huge boost to their social capital. The participants of my study stand as empirical evidences of Putnam's (2000) concept of 'bridging social capital' which denotes the link between heterogeneous social groups.

Economic capital

The contribution of education to economic growth, poverty reduction and reduction in inequalities has been emphasized by many researchers. Though this had been empirically validated by the participants of my study, from their interviews it could be understood that they felt that higher education was just the starting point. They opined that other complementary measures were needed for their economic progress. It had been observed in this study that after graduating and getting employed, most of the first-generation learners were in a position to financially invest in acquiring assets and helping their family and siblings. Economic capitals in the form of land, house and vehicle were acquired. Their economic status was uplifted. They were also planning further enrichment of their economic capital in the future.

I have tabulated below the comparison of the economic capital of the participants of my study before they joined our institution and their current status. All of the participants now possessed LED TV, fridge, mixer, grinder and other home appliances. I have not explicitly mentioned it under their current assets column. The assets that were considered were land, property

of value (like houses, farm animals and trees that generate income),
valuable jewelry, four wheelers, two wheelers and electronic appliances.

Name	Economical Capital before joining our institution		Enhancements to Economical Capital	
	Income p.a. (in Rs.)	Assets	Income p.a. (in Rs.)	Assets
M1	30,000/-	1 Acre agricultural land, 20 Sheep, One small black and white TV, Fan	5,20,000/-	Nil
M2	17,000/-	Small hut, Tape recorder	7,00,000/-	Saved money to buy a house
M3	Nil (helped by foster grandfather)	Nil	9,00,000/-	Bike, some jewels
M4	24,000/-	Nil	6,75,000/-	House
M5	24,000/-	Nil	6,70,000/-	Nil
M6	50,000/-	Hut, old black and white TV	8,00,000/-	Nil
M7	25,000/-	2.5 acres agricultural land (grandfather)	7,75,000/-	1.3 acres of land, bore well
F1	24,000/-	Hut	6,50,000/-	Nil
F2	48,000/-	Small house	9,00,000/-	Renovated old house and constructed a concrete house with

				3 rooms in ground floor
F3	36,000/-	Nil	5,50,000/-	Nil
F4	30,000/-	Old TV	5,50,000/-	Land purchased to build house, home appliances
F5	55,000/-	1 acre agricultural land, small hut, mixer and grinder	10,50,000/-	House, electronic appliances, vehicle
F6	50,000	2 acres of agricultural land, some coconut trees, small hut	9,25,000/-	House and jewels

Table 8 – Economic Capital: Before joining our institution Vs. Current

Source – Author’s own work

The lived experiences of the rural, first generation learners suggest that there was an enhancement in the cultural and social capital of the participant. This had resulted in a marked improvement in their economic capital as well, supporting Bourdieu’s (1996) statement that all forms of capital were inextricably linked with economic capital.

The rural, first generation learners of my study originated with limited cultural and social capital, especially when compared with their non-first generation peers. They have defied the theory that their educational

attainment was influenced by their parents' education. Based on their perception, the specially designed supplementary curriculum was necessary for them to overcome the cultural and social barriers and get gainful employment. Their lived experiences suggest that there was an enhancement in their cultural, social and economic capitals. So the participants of this study stands exceptions to Bourdieu's cycle of cultural and social reproduction.

3. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in navigating the cultural barriers?

As we had seen in the discussions for my first research question, the participants of my study joined our institution with lesser cultural capital – some form of embodied capital acquired due to the family support and encouragement – than their non-first generation peers. There are a lot of cultural barriers faced by the first-generation learners who had been uprooted from a rural village environment, where they had spent their entire life till then, into an institution, which had immense infrastructure and highly educated faculty and many urban students, fluently conversing in English, barely decipherable by them. They felt overawed.

I will discuss how the three forms of cultural capital, namely, embodied state, objectified state and institutionalized state, defined by

Bourdieu (1986) were impacted during their four year of study at our institution.

Cultural capital

1. Embodied State

Though the embodied state was acquired over time and was dependent on the habitus, the participants of my study felt that the four years at our institution and the various special initiatives designed by our institution had improved this capital, especially their English communication skills.

Cultural differences between the first-generation learners and the city bred students were initially very pronounced – their inability to communicate effectively, their inhibitions and hesitations caused a sense of low self-esteem. Some of the participants conveyed that initially they experienced some reservations when they moved with their non-first generation peers.

Scott (2008) has said that the first year is very important since it created the foundation for ensuring a successful transition. Many focused initiatives had been designed by our institution in the first year to help the first generation learners. It started with a 3-week orientation course. The participants of my study opined that the specially designed orientation course helped them to get accustomed to their new environment, away from

their village and also prepared them for their life in a higher education institution.

Bourdieu (1997) has posited that the embodied state basically defines the way one thought, his/her aspirations, the way one behaved, etc. Gunetilleke, De Silva & Lokuge, (2011) state that the personal values of individuals were greatly influenced by their family background and the situations they faced in their life. In order to reorient the participants of this study and help to enhance their embodied cultural capital a special initiative taken by our institution was the mentorship program. Each first generation learner was assigned a mentor, who was a faculty conversant with the problems of first generation learners. A mentor was an experienced and trusted adviser. But most importantly, the participants felt that they were essentially the bridge through which they crossed from their village culture into the new higher education environment. They were the psychological and emotional moorings and were kind, supportive and great motivators at times most needed. The participants further conveyed that their mentors encouraged them to persevere, to look for opportunities to excel and to aspire for a career and life which their parents and previous generations had never achieved. They explained to them the meaning and value of overall development, the need to combine academic achievement with personality, confidence, discipline, empathy and to contribute to their family, their village and to the society. They also organized special classes for these rural, first

generation learners, when they were unable to understand what was taught in a regular class. The first generation learners hesitated to voice their doubts during the regular classes because of their deficiency in spoken English. They felt that the mentors helped in bridging the gap between them and the rest, helped them understand the academics, gave them the confidence to handle the diverse cultures that existed and also provided an insight into the world beyond our institution that they were destined to go to. As Bloomer and Hodkinson (2000) mention, faculty can improve the well-being of learners and facilitate effective, goal-directed learning. By changing the perceptions of the first generation learners, his/her disposition to learning improved.

“Mentorship support was the main support. If I had any doubt, any questions on whom to approach for what, get mentally stressed out, feel home sick and suffer from frustration then I would go and meet my mentor; she would resolve my problem, make me fresh again with her positive and energetic words”

F3

Development in the embodied state was also dependent on improvement in communication skills. Inability to communicate in English was a major hurdle. Improvement in this aspect triggered an upsurge in self-confidence, which in turn had a positive effect on self-esteem. As I had discussed previously, the participants of this study could hardly speak a line

in English when they got admitted to our institution. This was a big challenge. The two special initiatives aimed at enhancing their English communication skills were the orientation course in their first year and the special English coaching classes which was conducted throughout their four years at our institution. The orientation course aimed to increase their comfort levels in English, develop their communication skills and helped them overcome their limitations in terms of listening to, speaking, reading and writing in English. This enhanced their peer interaction skills and built their overall self-confidence, thereby enabling them to integrate with their peers. The feedback from the participant about this initiative was very positive.

“Orientation course was very useful for teaching us to speak and write in English. Every day in that course, we used to do group discussions, discussing about day-to-day news in the newspapers. In the class we used to talk about a particular topic. Listened to the live news on TV and then discussed about it in class. It was very useful. I came to know how to form simple sentences and how to ask questions, only through the orientation course”

F2

Although a significant start was made through the orientation course to improve their English communication skills, they still lagged behind their peers, who had studied in English medium schools. To help them overcome

this deficiency, additional initiatives, like special English coaching classes were conducted. These special English classes continued at a level higher than what had been taught during orientation. The focus of these classes was on helping the rural, first-generation learners to grasp the essentials of English language in order to converse fluently with their peers and faculty. They felt that these special English language classes significantly developed their English proficiency. It also helped them to comprehend the academic classes conducted in English. This gave them the confidence to mingle with their peers and actively participate in extra-curricular activities etc. This resulted in enhancement of their self-confidence. Though these special English classes helped the students to converse in English in a reasonable manner, it was however not as good as the urban students.

Based on the perception of the participants, the specially designed supplementary curriculum at our institution appeared to have helped to gradually enhance the embodied cultural capital of the rural, first generation learners of this study.

2. Objectified State

The objectified state referred to the cultural goods. Since the participants of this study had no opportunity to earn during their four years at our institution, and they had to live on the scholarship provided by our institution, the possibility of acquiring cultural goods was nil. So there was

no change in their objectified capital in the four years of study at our institution.

3. Institutionalized State

This state of cultural capital referred to the educational qualifications. The very definition of the first generation learners emphasizes that their family had inadequate academic credentials and they had entered our institution with education up to twelfth standard. This was the limited institutionalized cultural capital they possessed on entering our institution. At the end of four years at our institution each of the participants of this study got their undergraduate degree in engineering. But for achieving this they had to overcome a lot of barriers.

One of the main barriers was that they had done their entire schooling in Tamil (regional language) and could not understand the classes which were conducted in English in our institution. They felt that the English taught during the orientation program and the subsequent special coaching classes in English helped them to overcome this problem to a certain extent.

All the participants of this study felt that the special coaching classes for academic subjects, conducted in the evenings was a boon. Many of the concepts were explained in Tamil for their understanding. Then slowly the English equivalent of the same terms and concepts were explained to them. This made them understand their lessons and perform well in their exams.

With the help of these classes they were able to complete their undergraduate engineering program.

The mentorship program was another initiative which the participants found to be very effective in helping them overcome their academic hurdles. The mentors not only gave the first generation learners a lot of moral support and motivation, but also helped them in understanding the subjects. The mentors were from the same department as the participants and so they were able to clarify the doubts that the participants had in their academics.

The participants of this study opined that had it not been for the supplementary curriculum they would not have been able to complete their engineering undergraduate degree in four years. This contributed to a substantial augmentation to their institutionalized cultural capital.

4. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in acquiring the skills and attitude necessary for employment, such as proficiency in English, self-confidence and the ability to connect and cooperate with others?

Thomas & Quinn (2007, p.56) postulated that the first generation learners 'did not enter the university on equal terms'. Pascarella et al. (2004) recommended that focused complementary efforts had to be taken

by the higher education institutions to equip the first generation learners with the employability skills expected by the labour market.

There are various abilities and attitudes which can be categorized under 'employability skills'. I would like to go with the employability skills listed out by Hogan et al. (2013). They had mentioned that interpersonal skill or social competence was the most important from the employers' perspective. Interpersonal skills included the capabilities to socialize, effectively communicate, cooperate and connect with people in life, at an individual level and within a group. Since English was the business language, for my analysis I took English as the language for communication skills.

The participants of this study support Terenzini's (1995) observation that they were lesser prepared in life skills than their peers (non-first generation learners). As Thomas & Quinn (2007) had postulated, initially they felt very intimidated and hesitated to interact with their peers and their faculty. All these challenges, along with their lack of English language skills gave them a low self-esteem, which adversely impacted their self-confidence. The participants of this study felt that if they had been left to fend for themselves, without any complementary efforts by the higher educational institutions, they would have found it very challenging to acquire the necessary attitude and skills expected by the labour market. It would have been very difficult for them to compete with their peers. Our institution had designed various initiatives to build the employability skills of the first

generation learners. I will discuss how the three skills and attitude essential for employability, namely, proficiency in English, self-confidence and the ability to connect and cooperate with others, were impacted by these initiatives.

a) Proficiency in English

At the time of their admission to our institution most of the first-generation learners were unable to read, write or speak in English. Since the medium of education and communication at our institution was English, it was imperative that these students learnt the basics of this language to facilitate communication.

This basic knowledge was inculcated through the orientation course, which was conducted three weeks before the reopening of the academic session. The first generation learners were therefore a step ahead from where they had started in our institution, before the academic session began. The students built up a medium of communication - though shaky - to at least try and connect with others.

“It gave a base (common language) to communicate with others. We became confident of speaking with others in English, to interact with faculty members and students from urban background”

M1

The participants of this study felt that the orientation course was an initiation facilitator. After the orientation course, they began understanding

the conversations taking place in English around them. Some of the first-generation learners were able to connect with the non-first generation learners, particularly the ones who were from non-Tamil speaking states. Some of them were able to communicate with faculty members in order to understand classroom lectures. After the academic session began their peers and faculty members encouraged them to speak in English and not to get concerned or feel conscious of the mistakes they might make in doing so. They motivated them by emphasizing that they had stood first in their school and if they persevered they would ultimately succeed.

The orientation course had group discussions, debates about day-to-day news in the newspapers. Each person had to talk about a particular topic after listening to and understanding the English news on TV. This continuing process of self-practice helped them to learn how to form sentences and ask questions. The orientation course helped them to comprehend to a certain extent what was being taught in the regular classroom lectures.

Though their proficiency in English became better in the orientation course, it was not sufficient for them to confidently participate in campus recruitments. Special coaching classes in English, throughout their four years at our institution, was organized to cater to this requirement. The focus of these classes was to enable the first-generation learners to improve their communication skills sufficiently to interact with persons from diverse cultures and to confidently face the recruitment interviews.

However, given their cultural and social background embodied through their formative years in the rural society and the lack of educated parents, they felt that they could not achieve the same level of proficiency as the non-first-generation learners in English language. Many of them struggled to get recruited. None of them were able to get recruited by dream companies.

b) Self Confidence

Self-confident persons are those who believe in their own abilities, strengths and powers and are not burdened by doubts, low self-esteem and low self-respect. As I had mentioned earlier, the English language proficiency was the trigger that helped the first generation learners and this led to gradual improvement in their self-confidence and self-esteem. Acquiring some basic knowledge of spoken and written English was just the beginning. It helped in being able to connect with others and that by itself was a confidence booster.

The mentorship program of our institution was another initiative which was greatly appreciated by the participants of this study. The mentors very effectively assisted them when they were unable to understand what was taught during regular classes, since they were hesitant to voice their doubts during a regular class because of their deficiency in spoken English. Overcoming their academic difficulties made it easier and quicker for these students to perform well in their studies, which had a direct positive impact on their self-confidence.

Mentors encouraged the students to persevere, to look for opportunities to excel and to aspire for a career and life which their parents and past generations had never achieved. They explained to them the value of overall development and motivated them to excel and be a model to their family, their village and their society. Their guidance enthused these young students. They were able to have a better perception about what they should aim to achieve in life. The mentors guided them to augment their goals – their 'possible selves' (Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). They were fully energized, motivated and confident to face all remaining hurdles and succeed.

Special evening classes were taken in the regular subjects during week days to answer their queries and clear doubts they might have had during their regular classes. Since all the first-generation learners had done their schooling in Tamil, they found it difficult to understand the classroom lectures conducted in English. To overcome this initial difficulty, between 4.00 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. every day during the week days, classes were taken for them by a faculty who was conversant in Tamil. The faculty taught them both in Tamil and in English. Thus they made them feel comfortable and cleared any doubts they might have had during the regular classes. Special academic classes were arranged for students who needed additional coaching. A firm grasp of the core engineering subjects was crucial since that was the platform on which the engineering graduate will stand and use

his/her skills to ascertain, implement and control a project or task. This additional attention given to them was a great contributor in developing the first-generation learner's confidence to handle the examinations.

During the summer break after their third year, these students had to undergo a special job oriented, placement training course for about 60 to 80 hours conducted by external trainers. They were very appreciative of this course and felt that this helped them develop their confidence to handle the recruitment interviews and tests conducted by the companies which came for campus recruitment during their final year at our institution. Various expertise acquired were self-confidence, time management skills, presentation and grooming, group discussion and aptitude test, thinking and problem solving capabilities, quantitative analysis, reasoning analysis and advanced vocabulary and how to present one-self.

c) Ability to connect and cooperate with others

Thomas & Quinn (2007) have said that first-generation learners had difficulty in socially integrating with their peers and faculty. In order to overcome this hesitation, the first generation learners were encouraged to actively participate in co-curricular activities like seminars, workshops, conferences and other technical events. This greatly helped in developing their ability to mingle with their peers. Effective participation in these activities also helped develop various abilities such as team management, leadership quality and organizational skills. They were also made to

participate in socially relevant activities like National Social Service and Youth Red Cross. The participants of this study opined that such activities gave them an exposure to varied group of people, which helped them to confidently interact and connect with the outside world. Participation in these activities gradually acclimatized them to mingle with their peers and outsiders.

5. What challenges do first generation learners at our institution face in higher education and in employment?

Overcoming the cultural and social barrier was the major challenge faced by the participants of this study. Bourdieu (1997) had included linguistic capital as a form of embodied cultural capital. Malhoit (2005) had said that their lack of proficiency in English was decidedly a big disadvantage for them. The business language globally is English and in all reputed educational institutions in India the medium of education is English. There was a lack of awareness of the importance of English language among the village school administrators and teachers. Shortage of good English teachers in school lead to inadequate education in English up to their twelfth standard. The foremost challenge that the first-generation learners therefore faced was lack of proficiency in English.

The participants of this study felt that if initiatives had not been taken by our institution to rectify this deficiency, then they would not have been

able to grasp the essentials of the engineering subjects. In addition, their lack of communication skills would have resulted in their inability to overcome the cultural challenges at our institution and beyond. As a result of the orientation course at our institution they felt that this linguistic barrier was reasonably overcome. They opined that with the passage of time, the special English coaching classes and the mentorship program further helped to bridge their deficiency in English proficiency, thereby enabling more interaction with faculty and peers. They felt that it was further honed through practical experiences in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities at our institution.

With the formative years of up to the age of seventeen having been spent in a rural village environment, where the medium of spoken and written communication was only Tamil, the first-generation learners had ended up thinking, speaking and writing in Tamil when they entered our institution. As Bourdieu, Passeron, & de saint Martin (1994) have posited, 'Of all the cultural obstacles, those which arise from the language spoke within the family setting are unquestionably the most serious and insidious. For, especially during the first years of school, comprehension and manipulation of language are the first points of teacher judgement. But the influence of a child's original language setting never cease to operate. Richness and style of expression are continually taken into account, whether implicitly or explicitly and to different degrees.' (p. 40). They found it very

challenging to fluently think, speak and write in English like many of the non-first generation learners.

Cultural differences were there in various forms - differences in ability to communicate, dressing sense, grooming, etiquette and the new environment. This primarily resulted in a low self-esteem among some first-generation learners. Initially they hesitated to seek clarifications from faculty fearing that they would be look down upon by them, which resulted in inability to grasp the basics of technical subjects. This resulted in them scoring lower marks in their examination.

There were other social issues like interacting freely with the opposite gender. In the rural villages the girls and the boys were segregated and refrained from interacting with one another. So they had a lot of inhibition to even talk to members of the opposite gender. In a regular student's life weekend outing - going out to a restaurant, beach or movies - was a routine. But this form of life was unknown to the first generation learners, since they came from the lower economic strata. They were awed by this lifestyle and considered these outings a luxury out of their reach. In addition, even the basic amenities like electricity was not available in a few of the first generation learners' houses. So sudden exposure to laptops, wi-fi internet connectivity was awe inspiring for them.

Brown & Hesketh (2004) have stated that the lack of cultural and social capital of the first generation learners greatly affected their employment prospects. Even at the time they graduated from our institution, their spoken and written English invariably had some grammatical errors and incorrect pronunciation. Further, their response time to understand what was being asked and to reply to it in English was slow. The non-first generation learners had access to good schooling. Their parents were able to guide them in their career options. Their social contacts helped them get proper training (like internships in reputed companies), which made their resumes look very impressive to the recruiters. All these aspects had a negative impact for the first generation learners during their campus recruitment process where they had to compete with their non-first-generation counterparts. In spite of all the various special initiatives in the supplementary curriculum designed by our institution, the first generation learners felt that for the more coveted jobs, their peers had an edge.

“I had problem with communication skills; dream companies mostly preferred students with high proficiency in English and so I couldn’t get into any of these companies. Urban students’ English skills and general knowledge was far better than mine. It is somewhat difficult to observe that in each stage of my career that I entered, I could see second or third generation learners doing much better than me. They

do better than we do. Still struggling to compete with them and somehow managing”

M2

6. How did first-generation graduates’ originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership differ at personal and family level?

In the discussions for the previous questions, we had seen the changes in the cultural, social and economic status of the participants of this study from the time of admission to our institution till five years after their graduation from our institution. I will now explore the class membership of the rural, first generation learners at their personal level.

We had seen in the previous discussions that based on the lived experiences of the participants, there was an enhancement in the cultural and social capital. All of them had successfully obtained a bachelor’s degree in engineering. They were all products of Putnam’s (2000) concept of bridging of social capital.

Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002) have pointed out that though normally cultural and social reproduction would be true, complementary measures could help in breaking this reproduction process. The participants of my study seem to support this hypothesis. I had previously listed out the complementary initiatives in the supplementary curriculum, which was designed by our institution to help the first generation learners overcome

their challenges and break the cycle of cultural and social reproduction. The lived experiences of the participants, which were gathered through the interviews and the gainful employment of all the 20 first generation learners who had join our institution under the Rural Scholarship Scheme in 2008, seem to indicate that the specially designed supplementary curriculum was needed to assist them in breaking the cultural and social reproduction cycle.

I will examine what category of class membership the participants would fall into based on their economic status. There are various categorizations of economic class membership. For this study I would like to consider the categorization based on income. I will use two surveys for this purpose, namely, the NCAER-CMCR 2010 survey (National Council of Applied Economic Research Annual Report 2010-11) and the India Human Development Survey of 2011-12 (IHDS-II).

I have given below the Indian Income Pyramid representation from the NCAER-CMCR 2010 survey:

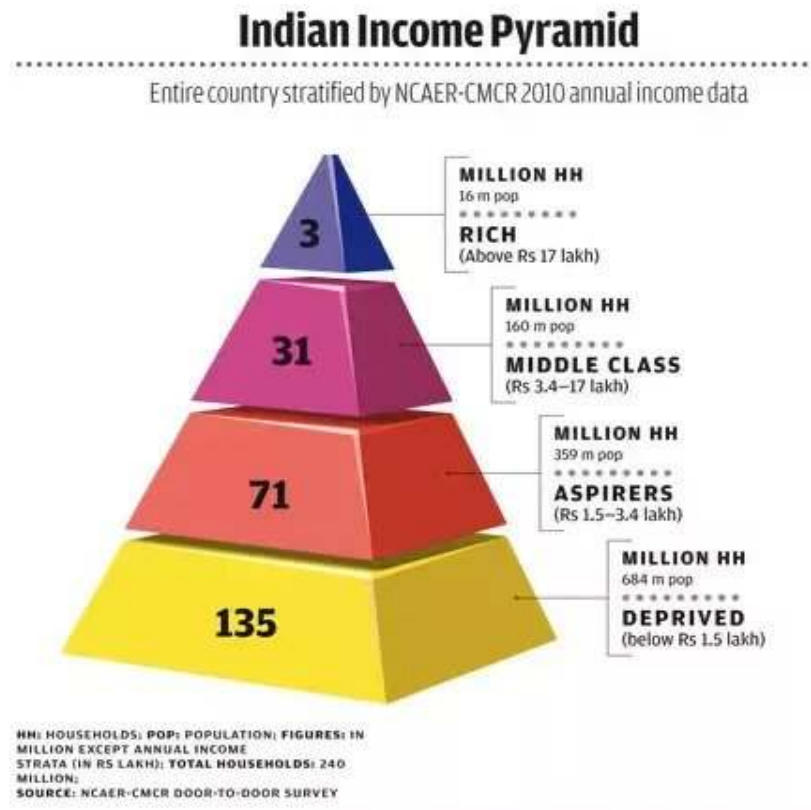


Figure 5 Indian Income Pyramid

Source: NCAER 2010

As per this pyramid, the participants initially belonged to the bottom slab (income of below Rs 1.5 lakh), which is labelled as 'Deprived'. 135 million households in India belong to this category. Five years after their engineering undergraduation, all of them have gone two categories up the pyramid and they belong to the 'Middle Class' category. 31 million households belong to this category. Economically, they have gone above 206 (135+71) million households in India. They have not only advanced culturally and socially, but this has also translated into economic advancement.

I have given below the IHDS-II survey report, categorizing the income range of the population of India into 5 quintiles. A quintile represents 20% of the population.

Income Quintiles	Annual Income Range (in Rs)
Poorest Quintile (Poorest 20%)	1,000 - 33,000
2nd Quintile	33,001 - 55,640
3rd Quintile	55,641 - 88,820
4th Quintile	88,821 - 159,600
Richest Quintile (Richest 20%)	159,601+

Table 9 – Income Range

Source: Taken from India Human Development Survey, 2011-12

The participants originated from either the Poorest Quintile or the Second Quintile, since all of their household income was less than Rs 55,640. Now all of their income is above Rs 500,000. So they belong to the Richest Quintile. This is a life-changing transformation. Empirically these participants have bridged the economic gap.

I will now examine the class membership of the family of the participants. In India, the elder people's income is based on three major sources: their own income and savings, support from the family, especially children and support from the state. Desai et al. (2010) state that most of

the care and financial support of the elderly in India come from the family rather than from the state or personal savings. This is true for the parents of the participants of my study as well. As per the Table 4 the income and savings of the parents are negligible. Moreover, in India the support from the state is also insignificant, since for the population as a whole, it has been computed as only Rs. 2,102 per year (Barik et al., 2015). In India 'Family is considered to be the ultimate source of economic, social and emotional support in old age.' (Barik et al., 2015, p. 111). The tabulation below computed by Barik et al. (2015) based on the IHDS 2004-05 and 2011-12 survey data further supports this statement.

Living Arrangements (in %) of Men and Women Aged 60 and Above in India, 2004-12

Family Type	Men		Women	
	2004-05	2011-12	2004-05	2011-12
Single	1.11	2.02	3.82	5.78
Couple	12.24	17.02	7.33	10.18
With unmarried children	15.81	14.88	5.73	6.76
With married children/others	70.84	66.08	83.12	77.28

Table 10 - Living Arrangements

Source: Taken from Barik et al. (2015)

It is interesting to note that 81% of the men and 84% of the women in India above the age of 60 live with their family member, mostly children. One of the fascinating findings in this study is that as soon as the economic

status of the participants improved, each of them contributed substantially towards the well-being of their family. This was in the form of buying assets for their parents, providing for their sibling's education, etc. They made sure that their family's financial obligations were taken care of in one way or the other. India is a mostly patrilineal society (Barik et al., 2015). The sons are expected to take the responsibility of taking care of and providing for their parents. It is thought-provoking to note that all the female participants of this study were very keen in providing for their family. They all wanted to break the social belief that only sons should take care of the parents. But still there is a mild gender bias deeply ingrained in them.

“My aim is to buy a house in Chennai on my own and to buy a car and to keep my parents happy and comfortable. I want to be like a son for them.”

F5

Here F5 mentions that she wants to be like a son, which seems to indicate that she feels that a son holds a superior position and a daughter is not entitled to take care of her parents.

“If all of us get married, my parents should not suffer for their survival. Hence, I want to earn money and deposit a big amount into my parent's bank account. From the deposited money, they will get the monthly interest for life”

While F2's intension is laudable, this also depicts an uncertainty. She seems to feel that after marriage she will have to comply with the wishes of her husband, who will be the decision-maker of the house. This shows that though they are socially advanced when compared to where they originated from, there is a lot more gap to be bridged with regards to their belief in women empowerment.

I would like to get back to the discussion about the class membership of the family of the participants. As seen from the above arguments, economically, in the context of household income, they belonged to the same class as their children, since they were all in the same household as their children. In the case of the parents of the participants of this study, their cultural and social capital underwent a much lesser change than that of their children. This marginal change can be attributed to Putnam's (2000) concept of 'bonding social capital'. Because of the bond they had with their children, the enhancement of the social capital of their children spilled over to them as well. While the participants of my study had more exposure to the outside world through their work place environment, the parents did not have this type of contact. Though the enhancement in the economic class of their children percolated down to them, there was limited improvement in their cultural and social class.

Discussion on Primary Research Question:

How effective did a cohort of rural, first generation learners find a specially designed supplementary curriculum in enhancing the outcome of higher education in terms of their employability skills and economic status?

The consolidation of the discussions on the six secondary research questions will provide the answer for my overarching primary research question. The supplementary curriculum was specially designed keeping in mind the various dimensions of difficulties faced by rural, first generation learners. For this study the outcome of higher education that I have examined are perception of the participants on the development of the skills and attitude that was necessary for employment and the impact of this on their economic status.

For assessing the impact of the specially designed curriculum on the first generation learners, it is necessary to understand the changes in their status in terms of their cultural, social and economic capitals. The assessment is based on the lived experiences of the rural, first generation learners, who had undergone this supplementary curriculum, which had been communicated through their interviews. My study considered Bourdieu's (1986) definition of cultural, social and economic capitals for evaluating the differences in these capitals for the participants during three phases of their lives – before joining our institution, during their four years

at our institution and five years after they left our institution. Bourdieu has defined three forms of cultural capital, namely, embodied, objectified and institutionalized as shown in Figure 3. Their families provided them the moral support to motivate them to excel in their studies. They had completed their education up to twelfth. Embodied capital also included linguistic proficiency and their aspirations. Since my study is related to employability skills, the language I have considered is English, which is the business language. The justification for this has been given in Chapter 3. Their linguistic proficiency related to English language was very poor. So the embodied cultural capital they possessed was very less. Since they did not possess any cultural goods, their objectified capital was minimal. No one in their family had any higher educational qualifications. The participants had studied up to twelfth and since they were first generation learners, the academic credentials of their family was not very significant. That was the institutionalized cultural capital that they possessed. Compared to their non-first generation peers, their institutionalized cultural capital was less. None of the participants had travelled much outside their villages till they joined our institution. They had no chance to socialize or get acquainted with any influential persons outside their villages. So compared to their non-first generation peers, especially those from urban cities, who had better access to influential people, their social capital was also less. Since the parents of the participants were daily wage workers, their family income was very

meagre. They had very inadequate economic capital. So when the participants joined our institution, they had very less cultural, social and economic capitals in comparison with the non-first generation learners.

It was evident that the participants needed additional support to compensate for their deficiencies in cultural, social and economic capitals. Their lack of economic capital was compensated by the scholarship provided to them by our institution, which took care of all their expenses, including tuition fees and living expenses. The participants stated that had it not been for the scholarship provided by our institution, they would not have been able to pursue their higher education. As per their interviews, the various initiatives designed by our institution helped them in their struggle to tide over the deficiencies in their cultural and social capitals and also resulted in enhancing these capitals. The orientation course and the additional coaching classes for English improved their linguistic proficiency. They appreciated their mentors, who motivated them to understand their true potential and also provided them guidance for their future, which they felt broadened their outlook. These steps improved their embodied cultural capitals, while their objectified and institutionalized cultural capitals remained the same. They opined that the orientation course helped to acclimatize them to their new environment. They also mentioned that their mentors helped them to overcome their inhibitions and move socially with the other students from varied background. Their involvement in extracurricular and co-curricular

activities further facilitated their uninhibited interaction with not only their peers, but also students from other colleges. So their social circle became larger. This enhanced their social capital. The three skills and attitude necessary for employment that this study addressed were English communication skills, cooperating and connecting skills and self-confidence (Hogan et al., 2013). The relationship between the employability skills and the cultural and social capitals has been depicted in Figure 4. The improvement in the cultural and social capitals helped to augment the employability skills. Initially some of the participants faced difficulty in getting recruited. They state that the motivation from their mentors and their peers assisted them to overcome these difficulties and get gainful employment offers. The findings from the participants' interviews demonstrated that higher education alone may not have helped the rural, first generation learners to get meaningful employment. They have stated that the supplementary curriculum was essential to equip them with the necessary skills and attitude needed for employment. Table 11 shows the employability skills and attitude, which were augmented by each initiative of the supplementary curriculum of our institution. Many researchers have postulated the various issues faced by the first generation learners in pursuing higher education. Some of them have suggested suitable interventions for overcoming these hurdles. The supplementary curriculum

also practically addressed the theoretical issues highlighted by various researchers.

Sl. No	Special Initiatives	Recommended / Referred by	Employability Skills		
			Proficiency in English	Self-confidence	Ability to connect and cooperate with other
1	Orientation Course	Malhoit (2005) Bourdieu (1997) - (Linguistic Capital) Scott (2008) Hogan et al. (2013) Kupfer, 2012 Thomas & Quinn (2007) Kim & Sax (2009)	✓	✓	✓
2	Mentorship	Owens et al., (2010) Payne (2007) Hogan et al. (2013) Stevenson & Clegg (2011) Thomas & Quinn (2007) Kim & Sax (2009)		✓	✓
3	Coaching classes for academics	Hogan et al. (2013) Kim & Sax (2009)		✓	
4	Additional coaching classes for English	Hogan et al. (2013) Malhoit (2005) Bourdieu (1997) - (Linguistic Capital) Thomas & Quinn (2007) Kim & Sax (2009)	✓	✓	✓
5	Extra-Curricular and Co-curricular activities	Pascarella et al. (2004) Hogan et al. (2013) Thomas & Quinn (2007) Kim & Sax (2009)		✓	✓
6	Special Placement Training	Hogan et al. (2013) Hirudayaraj (2011) Thomas & Quinn (2007) Kim & Sax (2009)		✓	✓

Table 11 - Impact of the Supplementary Curriculum of our institution
Source – Author’s own work

We have to note that though all the participants got gainful employment offers, none of them were able to get recruited by what students refer to as “dream” companies, which offered very high salary packages, but recruited very limited candidates. They felt that they were not able to successfully compete with their non-first generation peers for such exclusive offers. But overall their four years at our institution had enhanced their cultural and social capitals which lead to them getting gainful (though not exclusive) employment offers. Their economic capital remained the same.

Soon after the participants completed their engineering degree program and left our institution, all of them joined the workforce, based on employment offers they had got in their final year at our institution. English was the business language. Since they had to converse with all the stakeholders in English, their English language proficiency improved noticeably. They had direct contact with their superiors and colleagues, who provided them a better idea about their career path. They became more ambitious. They scouted for better opportunities and were able to get better jobs. There was a substantial augmentation to their embodied cultural capital. At this point in time they were busy establishing their career. They did not develop a taste for relishing cultural goods and related activities. So there was no improvement in their objectified cultural capital. They had acquired an engineering degree. Many of the participants had aided the

education of their siblings and other family members. This augmented their institutionalized cultural capital. So there was a big leap in their cultural capital. The participants were exposed to a diverse set of people in their workplace. They lived in urban cities and their neighbours and friends further enlarged their social network. Their social capital increased substantially, thus providing empirical evidences for Putnam's (2000) concept of bridging social capital.

Since all the participants enjoyed a salaried job, their economical capital also drastically improved from what it was before they joined our institution. Table 6 shows the evidence of this. In the Indian Income Pyramid representation from the NCAER-CMCR 2010 (National Council of Applied Economic Research Annual Report 2010-11) survey depicted by Figure 5 they have moved from 'Deprived' category to 'Middle Class' category. As per the categorizations in the IHDS-II survey report in Table 8 they have moved from the Poorest Quintile or the Second Quintile to the richest quintile.

Based on the lived experiences of the participants which was communicated through their interviews, we can infer that they perceived the specially designed curriculum effective in enhancing their attitude and employability skills, which resulted in them getting gainfully employed. This in turn led to uplifting their economic status.

Summary

The answers to the six secondary research questions and the primary research question, which framed my study were discussed in detail on the basis of the themes and sub-themes which emerged from my semi-structured interviews with the participants. The approach which underpinned my analysis was phenomenology. Additionally, the cultural capital theories posited by Bourdieu (1986) and Erikson & Goldthorpe (2002); the social capital theories defined by Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Putnam (2000) and the economic capital theories advanced by Bourdieu (1986) served as the secondary lens to interpret the themes and sub-themes which were listed in the previous chapter. There were some very interesting findings which emerged, especially the impact of the enhanced socio-economic status of the participants on the socio-economic status of their families. This finding in particular might be specific to the Indian cultural systems, where more importance is given to the familial ties. Implications of the inferences of this study and the recommendations that will influence the higher education policies of the Indian government will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

A brief Overview

Though India prides itself in being the fastest growing economy, one of the pressing issues hindering its progress is growing economic inequality (Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Databook, 2018). This growing inequality seems to support Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural and social reproduction, which leads to economic reproduction.

Education has been considered as one of the most effective method for reducing inequalities and promoting economic growth (Bloom et al., 2006; Tilak, 2015). Widening participation in higher education has been viewed as one of the defined paths for reducing economic inequality. It has been considered as a progressive initiative for uplifting the underprivileged. This has resulted in many first generation learners, who are invariably from underprivileged economic status, entering higher educational institutions. Most of these first generation are from rural government schools, where the medium of education is in the regional language. In majority of the professional higher education institutions, the medium of education is English. Can access to higher education alone provide the desired boost to the economic status of these first generation learners and break the cultural, social and economic reproduction cycle posited by Bourdieu (1986)? This

reproduction cycle can be broken only if higher education for the first generation learners leads to gainful employment, which would uplift their economic status.

Many researchers have highlighted the challenges that first generation learners face while pursuing higher education and when they compete with their non-first generation peers to get gainfully employed (Thomas & Quinn, 2007; Malhoit, 2005; Leondari, 2007). They struggle to overcome the cultural and social barriers. Their parents, who have no idea about higher education, are not equipped to provide them any guidance (Priebe, Ross & Low, 2008; Gunetilleke, De Silva & Lokuge, 2011; Hsiao, 1992; Striplin, 1999). Taking cognizance of the above factors, Bourdieu (1986) has concluded that education abets social reproduction. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002) have taken a more optimistic view and have recommended that specially designed interventions can help the first generation learners to overcome the cultural and social hurdles. The first-generation learners need additional, specially designed support for them to compete with their peers and get gainfully employed.

Our private, self-financed engineering school had designed a special supplementary curriculum to help first generation learners, from rural villages belonging to the economically lower strata, to overcome the cultural, social and economic barriers and get gainfully employed. The purpose of my research was to understand the lived experiences of a cohort of first

generation learners, who had undergone this specially designed supplementary curriculum. My research examined their perception of how effective this curriculum was in enhancing their employability skills and economic status and also the impact it had on their family's economic status.

Our institution is a highly reputed engineering school in Chennai, India. It is a philanthropic venture. I am the President of our institution. In order to provide inclusive education, I started the Rural Scholarship Scheme in 2008 at our institution. Under this scheme twenty first generation learners belonging to the lower economic strata, who had stood first in the higher secondary board examination in rural government schools, were provided admission in our institution and scholarship was provided for their entire tuition fees and living expenses. All of them had done their entire schooling in Tamil, the regional language and had minimal knowledge of English. The medium of instruction in our institution is English. Based on our experience with rural students admitted prior to implementing this scheme, I believed that financial support alone would not be sufficient for them to successfully complete their undergraduate engineering education and get gainfully employed. To enhance their learning experience and employability, we designed a special supplementary curriculum for them for four years, which contained the following modules and initiatives.

1. Orientation course
2. Mentorship

3. Additional coaching classes for academics
4. Additional coaching classes in English
5. Extra-curricular and co-curricular activities
6. Special placement training

All the twenty rural, first generation learners who were admitted into our institution under the Rural Scholarship Scheme in 2008 successfully completed their engineering degree program in 2012 and all of them were gainfully employed, as shown in Table 1. From this table we can understand that the entire cohort had an upliftment in their economic status. Thirteen from this cohort were the participants of my study. Six of them were female and seven of them were male. All of them had undergone the supplementary curriculum designed by our institution. My study was to understand the participants' perception about the impact of the various initiatives of the supplementary curriculum. This research required an in-depth comprehension of the lived experiences of the participants - to understand from their perspective the challenges that they faced in pursuing higher education, and to get an insight into their career and personal experiences after graduation. For this study, I used a qualitative phenomenological approach, which has been recommended by Hays & Singh (2012) and Creswell (2013), for the purpose of exploring a social phenomenon.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with the participants. The interviews were conducted in Tamil, the regional language,

so that the participant felt more comfortable in talking about their experiences, and recorded with the consent of the participants. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim in Tamil. It was then translated into English. From the translated interviews I coded the relevant data for my research, using open coding method. These codes were clubbed together to form six themes, with sub-themes under them. These themes were analyzed and the interpretations obtained from this analysis provided the points for discussion for my primary research question and six secondary research questions given below:

Primary Research Question

How effective did a cohort of rural, first generation learners find a specially designed supplementary curriculum in enhancing the outcome of higher education in terms of their employability skills and economic status?

Secondary Research Questions

1. Based on Bourdieu's (1986) definition of cultural, social and economic capitals, what capitals did the rural, first generation learners bring upon admission to our institution?
2. What is the relevance of Bourdieu's concept of cultural and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) with regards to the originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership of the rural, first generation learners, who had undergone the specially designed curriculum of our institution?

3. How did first-generation graduates' originating and ultimate (to-date) class membership differ at personal and family level?

4. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in navigating the cultural barriers?

5. How effective did the rural, first generation learners at our institution find the specially designed supplementary curriculum in acquiring the skills and attitude necessary for employment, such as proficiency in English, self-confidence and the ability to connect and cooperate with others?

6. What challenges did the rural, first generation learners at our institution experience in higher education and in employment?

The findings from the interviews with the participants of my study demonstrated their perception that higher education alone may not have helped them to overcome the challenges in getting meaningful employment. They felt that the supplementary curriculum helped them overcome the cultural and social barriers and it also aided in equipping them with the necessary employability skills that was essential for them to realize their potential and get gainfully employed.

Another thought-provoking finding of this research is that all the participants had contributed towards uplifting the economic status of their

families. I delved further into the aspect of familial bond in India. There are studies which stated that in India 'Family is considered to be the ultimate source of economic, social and emotional support in old age.' (Barik et al., 2015, p. 111). Another interesting computation of Barik et al. (2015) was that 81% of the men and 84% of the women in India above the age of 60 lived with their family member, mostly children. Through 'bonding social capital' defined by Putnam (2000), their cultural and social capitals improved marginally. The pronounced enhancement in the economic capital of the participants percolated to their family and resulted in their economic upliftment to a certain extent.

The participants of study stand as empirical proofs for bridging economic inequality through supplementary initiatives.

Original Contribution to Knowledge and Practice

Moore, Sanders & Higham (2013) have done a literature review of various researches pertaining to widening participation to higher education and have summarized their findings in order to assist the policy makers. They categorically indicate that, 'Most of these studies examine the role social, cultural and economic capital play in shaping the outcomes for under-represented groups: most do not set out to identify what works but to identify the issues' (p. 110). They further state that, 'Employability of students from widening participation backgrounds can also be supported by

innovative and targeted approaches, although there is little empirical evidence to suggest what works' (p. 108). They also found that there is 'no systematic research of the impact of interventions on employment outcomes for under-represented groups' (p. 116). Redmond (2006, p. 119) has remarked that 'few have explored the relationship between widening participation and employability'. Hirudayaraj (2011, p. 8) has asserted that the future research, 'needs to be targeted towards identifying barriers that prevent first-generation students from reaping the economic benefits of higher education and also systems that could enable a smooth transition into the labor market.' These are the gaps in research that my study aims to fill and create new knowledge.

I would like to mention some empirical researches, which are related to interventions for enhancing employability skills. Tchibozo (2007) had done an empirical study on 119 graduates and found that the participation in extracurricular activities improved their employment prospects. Pascarella et al. (2004) have done a longitudinal study on 18 first generation learners in order to understand the differences between the first generation learners and the other students. They have concluded that the first generation learners needed more 'sharply focused and sustained efforts' (p. 279). The California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) has a huge population of first generation students. They developed a Toro program for the first generation learners in the freshman year, which aimed at supporting their

intellectual, personal and social development. This program provided additional academic support for the students and also participation in activities on campus. A study conducted by CSUDH showed that though the Toro program participants had higher retention rates in the second year, 40% of these participants dropped out after two years. So the study concluded that the long term benefit of the program dissipated over time (Horwedel, 2008).

Tchibozo's study has examined only one aspect, namely participation in extracurricular activities, which enhances the employment prospect. Pascarella et al.'s study shows that the first generation learners need additional intervention to compete with their peers. But it does not identify any specific intervention that would be effective for the first generation learners. Though the CSUDH study is on a particular program for the first generation learners incorporated into the curriculum, this support is only for the freshman year. The long term success of this program has not been established.

The importance of creating a curriculum embedding employability skills have been emphasized by many researchers (Pegg and Carr, 2012; Williams, 2007; Thomas and Jones, 2007). The supplementary curriculum created by our institution for the first generation learners aims to gradually embed employability skills throughout their four years of study. The knowledge that I bring through my study is evidence of the lived

experiences of a cohort of rural, first generation learners, who perceived this comprehensive supplementary curriculum to have been effective in helping them overcome the cultural and social barriers and get gainfully employed. My study empirically provides evidence for the enhancing in the economic status of these rural, first generation learners. In addition, my study also brings to light how the improved economic status of the first generation learners impacts their family's economic status, which might be specific to the Indian culture.

My study has a lot of relevance to my practice. Education has been considered as an effective method for empowering young people and bridging economic inequality. There is going to be a phenomenal growth in higher education in India in the next few years (Heslop, 2014). Hence in India, all educational institutions will have a fair share of rural, first generation learners. Understanding the lived experiences of these rural, first generation learners is essential for other professionals in my field of education. My research has provided empirical evidences of the lived experiences of a cohort of rural, first generation learners, who found our supplementary curriculum effective in helping them get gainfully employed, thus uplifting their economic status. This is my contribution to my professional field of education.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

One of the initiatives of the Indian government to promote economic progress is to widen the participation in higher education. Though this has created greater opportunities for first generation learners to enter higher education, the growing economic inequality in India suggests that additional steps should be taken to enhance the effectiveness of this initiative for the upliftment of first generation learners. Erikson and Goldthorpe (2002, p. 45) have warned that 'Educational expansion and reform alone should not, therefore, be expected to serve as very effective instruments of public policy at creating greater equality of opportunities'. The socio-economic impact of higher education on the lives of the first-generation learners has been to a large extent neglected (Hirudayaraj, 2011).

Though my study is based on a very small sample, I would like to humbly put forth some recommendations, which I feel would be beneficial to first generation learners. From my study it is evident that the first obstacle for the first generation learners from lower economic strata to access good quality education is financial constraint. One of my recommendations would be that government has to ensure that at least the first generation learners from rural schools, who belong to the lower economic strata and have proved their merit by being among the top rank holders in their respective

schools in the twelfth board examinations, are provided full financial support to pursue higher education. The government should make sure that meritorious first generation learners are not deprived of good quality education due to financial constraints.

Thayer (2000) has mentioned that if institutions take concentrated efforts to understand the issues faced by first-generation learners and develop strategies to help them in overcoming those issues, then those strategies will work for the first-generation population in other campuses as well. I recommend that all higher education institutions should be sensitive to the needs of the first generation learners and implement a similar supplementary curriculum in their respective institutions for aiding the first-generation learners studying there. This concerted effort will help a larger community of first generation learners break the cycle of reproduction of economic capital, which in turn will ensure the economic progress of India.

Limitations of the Study

My study is limited to the first generation learners, who were top rankers in their respective schools. They were all very motivated and had the urge to succeed in life. The sample size is also small. So this may not be applicable to the entire population of first generation learners. All the participants studied undergraduate engineering, which is a professional course with better employment prospects than other arts and science

courses. The suitability of this supplementary curriculum for arts and science courses has not been tested.

Recommendations for further research

Further research on the suitability of this curriculum for non-engineering disciplines is recommended. In addition, more research for tailoring this supplementary curriculum for first generation learners, who do not have any moral support or encouragement from family members is suggested. Scott (2004) has emphasized the importance of using evidences for not only examining the effects of the change process but also for using this as a measure for improving the process. Further improvement on the specially designed supplementary curriculum by our institution could be considered. More research into the scalability of the proposed targeted initiatives to a larger mass of diverse first generation learners is recommended.

Appendix

Interview Guide

Part 1 – Before joining our institution

1. Can you explain the cultural background you came from– the profession of your parents, the educational qualification of the members of your family, etc.
2. What was the type of society you moved around with – your friends, relatives, etc.? Who was the most influential person you knew?
3. What was the annual income of your family? What were the assets that you possessed?
4. What was your motivation to pursue higher education? How supportive was your family?
5. What were the main challenges you faced for entering higher education?
6. Can you tell me about your proficiency in English in speaking, reading and writing?
7. What were your aspirations?

Part 2 – Experiences at our institution

1. Can you tell me how you felt when you first entered our institution?
2. What do you feel was the impact of the orientation course at our institution on your English proficiency in speaking, reading and writing?

3. To what extent did the orientation course help in building your self-confidence?
4. To what extent did the orientation course help you to interact comfortably with your peers and your faculty?
5. What were the major cultural differences that you found between your life at your home and your life in our institution? How did you manage to adjust? Did any particular support given at our institution help you in this aspect?
6. What were the initial difficulties you faced in interacting with your peers and faculty? Did this change over the years at our institution?
7. How helpful did you find the mentorship support offered to you?
8. How helpful were the additional special classes in English?
9. How did the special classes in academics contribute towards your academic success?
10. What are all the co-curricular activities you participated in? In what way did they help in your personality development?
11. What were the major challenges you faced in completing your degree program? How did you manage to overcome them? Did any particular initiative of our institution help you in this? How?
12. What additional support provided by our institution helped you the most? In what manner?

13. How effective did you find the special placement training course offered to you? What were the skills you feel this course helped you to acquire?
14. What were your aspirations at the end of 4 years at our institution?

Part 3 – Current Life

1. What were the challenges you faced in getting employed? How did you overcome them? Did any particular initiative of our institution help you in this? How?
2. What is your cultural background now – your profession, your living style, the place you live, etc?
3. What are the educational qualifications of your siblings (if any)?
4. What is the type of society you moved around with – your friends, your colleagues, etc.? Who is the most influential person you know?
5. What is your annual income? What is the current annual income of your family (excluding yours)? What are the assets that you possess?
6. What are your aspirations now?
7. What aspects of the special initiatives taken by our institution could be improved? In what manner?
8. In terms of your career, what experiences in our institution helped you the most? Kindly explain.

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