# The practice of choice-making: applying Bourdieu to the field of International Schooling

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# Abstract

This paper presents findings from ground-breaking research on choice-making among teachers, school leaders and parents in a for-profit British International School in Kuwait. Using a Bourdieusian field analysis, the choice-making of the various stakeholders is investigated to reveal their positionality within the school’s social space, to examine the resources they hold and the capitals in which they are willing to invest. We find that choices made by, and within, an international school reveal symbolic violence, and a ‘taken-for-granted understanding’ that this form of schooling - British rather than American International Schooling - is superior. Participants in the research included teachers, parents, graduating class students and school leaders. Teachers and parents were a representative mix of local (both Arab and non-Arab) and expatriates. The study is unique in its theoretical framework and in its inclusion of the wider stakeholder population, which together generates a deeper understanding of professional practice in International Schools.

# Key words:

International schooling; Pierre Bourdieu; *capital*, *field*, habitus, symbolic violence

# International schooling: An introduction

In 2019, the International School Consultancy (ISC) recognised nearly 11,000 international schools catering for some 5.65 million students worldwide and generating a revenue of US$51.79 billion. Despite recession and other economic difficulties in the developed world, International Schools have proved ‘recession proof’ (Waterson, 2015) and numbers continue to proliferate, particularly in Asia and the Middle East. However, while the number of schools identifying as ‘international’ is increasing, attempts to categorise them is proving to be difficult. Bunnell, Fertig and James (2016) categorised international schools as either Type A, regarded as the ‘ideal’, with an international body of students and faculty, and Type B, being schools with a simple internationalist ideological orientation. They note the existence of a Type C” schools that unlike Type A and Type B, are usually for-profit, catering for a more local or indigenous community, but typically using English as the language of instruction.

Bunnell, Fertig and James (2016) voice concerns about the *field* of international schooling being increasingly dominated by organizations that claim to be ‘international’ but are far removed from the ISC definition of an International School as one that

*“delivers a curriculum to any combination of pre-school, primary or secondary students, wholly or partly in English outside an English-speaking country, or, if … in a country where English is one of the official languages, offers an English-medium curriculum other than the country’s national curriculum and … is international in its orientation.”*

This definition acknowledges the spread of English-medium schools world-wide. The International School Research (ISC) organisation, which provides intelligence pertaining to International Schools reports in the data page on their website that out of 11,000 International Schools, 10,282 (94%) are English medium (ISC, 2019). Reflecting the reality that English is the language of banking, commerce, science, travel and employment in an increasingly globalised world (Lauder, 2007; Potter and Hayden, 2004). Speaking English fluently, which International Schools advertise as a benefit, adds social value to students and a sense of having an ‘elite’ education (Al-Rubaie, 2010; Rydenvald, 2015). Bunnell (2014) accepts that while the ISC definition of international schooling is not unproblematic, it is realistic.

Typically, International Schools are fee-paying. Fees are covered mostly by parents willing, and with the means, to pay, or in some cases by government grants or corporate donations (MacDonald, 2006). It could be argued that expatriate employees, diplomats and international business ‘globetrotters’ have no choice but to enrol their children in international schools since national / public systems are not a viable option due to language barriers and/or government catchment restrictions, but increasingly *local* families are opting to attend fee-paying International Schools to acquire what the ISC (2019) describes as a passport that enables students to compete for places in universities worldwide. This is particularly true for International Schools with a distinctive British outlook (Bunnell, 2014), collectively called British Schools Overseas (BSO) and affiliated to an organisation of the same name. This article reports findings from a study that explored choice-making among stakeholders in one such for-profit school in Kuwait using a Bourdieusian understanding of *fields*. It makes a significant contribution to our theoretical understanding in this growing but under-researched area.

# Literature review

Research in Israel, Argentina, Japan, Singapore and Switzerland suggests that parents opt for International Schools because they provide a better learning environment than local alternatives (Ezra, 2007; MacKenzie, 2010; Mackenzie et al., 2003). These various studies used different theoretical lenses to frame their research, so Mackenzie (2010) presents general patterns by aggregating data from the different studies to show that English as the language of instruction is the most important common factor among the various parent populations in attracting them to International Schools, and that an internationalist education per se is not a priority. This reflects a disconnect between marketing advocates of International Schools promoting ‘international and intercultural understanding’ (Hill, 2014) and the reality of parents’ choice. In short, research tends to ignore how parents go about making choices relying on Rational Choice Theory, which assumes that their socio-cultural characteristics and history have no influence on their decision-making.

Another emergent theme amongst parents choosing International Schools is that they are viewed as a means to secure positions in prestigious universities (MacKenzie, 2010), especially English-speaking ones (Monitor, 2015). Kanan and Baker (2006) suggest that International School students study in universities abroad more than students attending local schools. In the United Arab Emirates, for example, a survey of 108 students in an International School shows that although university choice was a complex issue, particularly with rising tensions in the Middle East and with stricter visa policies to countries such as the US, Canada and the UK (Wilkins, 2013), the choice of studying abroad was still a strong driver for those with high aspirations. While these ‘International School-to-university’ studies have been small in scale and can be quickly out-dated in that they are set against a rapidly changing political backdrop, they do reveal an interesting phenomenon; namely, the rise of local universities with overseas affiliations – for example, the New York University of Abu Dhabi - which reinforces English as the Lingua Franca of education and career advancement.

On the other side of the coin – from the perspective of the teacher rather than the student – the media in western countries like the UK regularly carry stories warning of a ‘brain-drain crisis’ as qualified teachers leave the UK to seek jobs in International Schools (Richardson, 2016) - the implication being that these schools threaten the domestic supply of teachers – although International Schools also suffer from a shortage of teaching staff. Generally, teachers in International Schools tend to be native English speakers (Canterford, 2003). The International School labour market is segmented, favouring mostly UK and US citizens, and as such exacerbates recruitment issues such as increased competition due to the expansion of the International School sector, the diminishing supply of staff (COBIS, 2018; Masudi, 2016), and a teacher turnover that can be as high as 60 per cent (Mancuso et al., 2010). The literature suggests that the migration of teachers to International Schools from English-speaking countries such as the UK, the US and Canada can be attributed to work-intensification and a diminishing professional identity at home (Coulter and Abney, 2009; Hrycak, 2015), but other studies have shown that teaching in International Schools can lead many migrating teachers into a time and place of uncertainty (Bunnell, 2016; Poole, 2019), culture shock (Joslin, 2002; Roskell, 2013) and an unsettling world of workplace micropolitics (Caffyn, 2011). The issue of teacher retention in International Schools follows from these disadvantages, whether perceived or real. Two significant studies stand out in addressing the issue: Odland and Ruzicka (2009) and Mancuso and White (2010). Odland and Ruzicka (2009) posted a survey on the Council of International School’s website (CIS) asking teachers for the influential factors that led them to leave their International Schools at the end of their first contract. The study concluded that the major reasons why teachers decided to leave were lack of communication between teachers/faculty and senior management, lack of support from senior management, and a low degree of teacher involvement in decision-making. Personal circumstances play a part too in the decision to leave with departing teachers expressing concern about the commercial / for-profit nature of International Schools, dissatisfaction with having to work with ‘local colleagues’, and misrepresentation during the original recruitment and contractual processes.

Mancuso and White (2010) followed up the Odland and Ruzicka study by comparing two groups of International School teachers, departing teachers and remaining teachers, and their reasons for leaving / remaining. Using the International Teacher Mobility Survey, they confirmed Odland and Ruzicka’s results with respect to the importance of supportive leadership, their conclusions shedding light on the importance of the head of school rather than individual headteachers.[[1]](#footnote-1) Middle-aged teachers in International Schools were found by Odland and Ruzicka to be more mobile, which contradicts earlier research in the US that showed greater mobility with teachers who are either young(er) or old(er) (Ingersoll, 2001).

The literature is notable for its paucity and for what Waterson (2016: 193) has called ‘a gap in what is known about the motivation, business model, modus operandi and impact of for-profit International Schools from the perspective of stakeholders’. This paper seeks to redress that deficit particularly in our focus on researching the stakeholder viewpoint. In the next section we describe a Bourdieusian theoretical framework chosen for its ability to capture that stakeholder perspective.

# Theoretical Framework: Bourdieu’s thinking tools

The literature review above reveals limitations in the research done in the area of International Schooling, difficulties in defining it and issues with sampling, but more importantly, the review shows the need for an in-depth understanding of the nuanced behaviour of stakeholders. Issues also arise with respect to the epistemological and ontological grounding of studies in the *field* particularly around the positivistic- subjective divide, each of which only provides a partial understanding of practice. To get around these epistemological and ontological difficulties, we grounded our research in Bourdieu’s understanding of practice framing it around an understanding of International Schooling as a *field* as it evokes Bourdieusian concepts of *capital* and *habitus.* According to Thompson (2012) a Bourdieusian methodology buys a researcher three main advantages: an ontological orientation; a commitment to rigour; and a reflexive stance. These are pertinent to research in this *field* because of the need for an ontological orientation that is both social and relational. International Schooling originated as a social construct and how different people interact in society depends on their relative positions in space. A Bourdieusian approach emphasises reflexivity on the part of the researcher, which brings forth a researcher’s position in space; that is to say, the relationship of the researcher to the “taken-for-granted” rules within the academic field and to the research subject, which has not been previously addressed by International School research because many of the researchers are either former or current employees in International Schools, or are native English speakers studying a context that is not.

International Schooling is a *field*, a bounded area of social space. According to Bunnell (2014), depicting International Schooling as a *field* is beneficial for analysis because it has boundaries, membership and its own language (Walker, 2003). To be a member of a particular *field*, means implicitly accepting and following its rules(Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Individuals in a *field* internalise the ‘rules of the game’ and develop accepted practices as determined by these rules, which is manifested by an individual’s *habitus*. The *habitus* is an internalising of the external *field*. It is also an externalisation of the internal through expressions of mannerisms and acquired tastes, such as accents for example. Constituted in one’s history, *habitus* allows one to behave in future events in a reasonable manner. It is “how well is a body capable of deploying itself in particularenvironment” (Hage, 2013: 218) and explains why people develop a “feel for the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 223) and feel at home, like a “fish in water” (Bourdieu, 1996).

Grenfell (1995) has theorised that in training to be teachers, a *pedagogic habitus* develops according to the trainees’ professional and cultural backgrounds, as well their specific training. Similar to *habitus*, *Pedagogic habitus* explains configurations explicitly manifested through the practice of teaching. *Pedagogic habitus*, explains why some novice teachers feel ‘safer’ using traditional teaching methods (ibid.).

Individuals in a *field* interact and struggle to occupy certain spaces in their social space over resources or *capital*. When people ‘invest’ in *capital*, people act in a way that is in line with the relationship of *field* and *habitus*. *Capital* is “accumulated labour, which when appropriated on a private (i.e. exclusive) basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labour” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 118). *Capital* are ‘tokens’ that allow the ‘players’ to buy positions in the *field* depending on its configuration (i.e. value and volume) (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). “*Capital* in action is the enactment of the *field*”, according to Moore (2012: 101–2) because its value is appropriated within the *field*. It is both objective by having material value and subjective by being embodied.

Bourdieu identifies three fundamental types of *capital*: economic, social and cultural (Bourdieu, 2002). Cultural *capital* can be found in three states: embodied in mannerisms; objectified in the form of goods such as books and art; and institutionalised, for example, in school certificates. All forms of *capital* can be exchanged in certain circumstances for economic *capital*. Ultimately, these are types of capital are *symbolic.* They ‘buy’ a person prestige in the *field* (Bourdieu, 1990). They are ‘symbolic’ because their value is arbitrary by nature and only has legitimacy within a *field*.

Three forms of cultural *capital* pertinent to the *field* of International Schooling: educational; academic; and intellectual. These forms were derived to explain differences amongst academics in prestigious French universities (Bourdieu, 1984b). Educational *capital* is the collection of “options studied or grades awarded in the baccalaureate” (ibid.: 168). Academic *capital* refers to academic power as opposed to intellectual *capital,* which is equivalent to scientific outcome and competencies of such academics (Wacquant, 1990: 680) .

All three concepts – *habitus*, *field* and *capital* – are interrelated. Bourdieu developed these concepts through his own empirical work. They were not created a priori. Understanding practice requires a relational mode of thinking in so much that each concept evokes the other. Being a member of a *field*, you are afforded various ‘acceptable’ behaviours manifested through the *habitus* in conjecture with the total *capital* one has. As we will discuss through the analysis, the practice of choice-making of an International School is related to type of *capital* that one has and is of value within the *field* of International Schooling, as well as one’s *habitus*.

Going back to the metaphor of the *field* as a game, Bourdieu (1992: 98) explains:

“We have an investment in the game, illusion … players are taken in by the game, they oppose one another, sometimes with ferocity, only to the extent that they concur in their belief (*doxa*) in the game and its stakes; they grant these a recognition that escapes questioning.”

Bourdieu distinguishes *doxa* from heterodoxy and orthodoxy by suggesting that *doxa* implies ‘awareness’ of the player, albeit (mis)recognised. In fact, through the players *illusio*, they adhere to rules of the game through acts of (mis)recognition. What is deemed worthwhile is imposed on players in the *field* through the *field* of power, who through an act of symbolic violence impose legitimacy on their own meaning of things and it goes by as (mis)recognised. For example, Bourdieu in his book *Distinction* (1984) proposes that education is an act of symbolic violence that imposes and reproduces ruling class structures (Bourdieu, 1984a). The word ‘violence’ was used by Bourdieu deliberately to evoke a negative imagery. He suggested that people may experience physical oppression as a result of symbolic violence, as in the case of military colonialism, but the most (mis)recognised forms of symbolic violence are more subtle in their manifestation, such as the reproduction of the cultural *capital* of the dominant in schooling.

Bourdieu’s approach allows researchers in the *field* of International Schooling to understand practice and strategy in relation to the positions and position-taking of agents rather than as persons acting in response solely to market trends (subject) or in a void (object) (Ball, 1997; Gunter, 2002; Widin, 2014). Bourdieu’s work asked questions of symbolic power and its impact on social spaces, and research on International Schools using Bourdieu’s approach affords us an understanding of trends in knowledge as homologous to trends in political space, and to examine critically the relationship between the two (McGinity, 2015; Thomson, 2010). It requires researchers to maintain vigilance through reflexivity in the sense that the researcher needs to turn the tools of their own research on themselves (Grenfell, 2017, 2019; Thomson, 2017). *Habitus*, *field* and *capital* need to be embodied and actualised not only to protect against bias, but also to form a ‘practical rationality’ and a ‘praxeological knowledge’ (Grenfell (2019: 167).

# Methodology

Our research on International Schooling has an ethno-case study design (Parker-Jenkins, 2018) combining features of an ethnography (such as a prolonged presence in the *field*) and those of a case study (with its in-depth use of multiple methods). This approach, we feel, best matches a Bourdieusian theoretical framework seeking to understand stakeholders’ positionality in the *field* and their *habitus*. Purposive sampling (Polkinghorne, 2005) was used to select a case study school from those that have been in operation for ten years or more and are accredited by the European Council of International Schools (ECIS) or CIS or have been awarded BSO status.[[2]](#footnote-2) This was our way of verifying their legitimacy within the *field* of International Schools. One school that expressed interest in participating in the study was selected. That school was an International School in Kuwait with BSO status from which students graduate with the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE) and A/AS-levels.

# Data collection

Multiple methods were used for data collection: interviews, surveys, documents and research journals (see Table 1). Table 1 shows the range of participants and types of documents collected. Forty semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 2007; Lichtman, 2013) were conducted with questions around three major themes: the reasons for choosing an International School; the process of choosing a particular international school; the relationship between expectation and experience for participants. Surveys collected demographic data and contained questions themed in a similar way to the interviews. The purpose of the survey and documentary analysis was a method of triangulation (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993; Patton, 1995).

We use a form of narrative analysis to capture key features of the case study (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007) by adapting Bourdieu’s (2005) depiction of housing projects in France. In his book *Weight of the world* (1999), Bourdieu and his team of interviewers presented their analysis of social suffering by extensive use of the interviewee’s own voice in long excerpts of text. We do likewise in our research: data from interviews and surveys were analysed to explore choice-making in the field of International Schooling by teachers (school leaders who were teachers initially) and parents as a manifestation of *habitus* and *capital* (accumulated or of value).

Table 1 Details of data collection

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Data collection method** | **Category** | **Details** |
| Focus group interview | * Students | * 6 |
| Semi-structured interviews | * Overseas contract staff | * 12 leadership team * 9 teachers |
|  | * Local contract staff | * 4 teachers |
|  | * Parents | * 9 |
| Surveys | * Parents * Leadership team * Teachers | * 24 * 4 * 19 |
| Documents | * Teacher nationalities; degrees |  |
|  | * Pupil nationalities; pupil university destinations |  |
|  | * School website to show partners/ memberships |  |
|  | * Pupil population for past 10 years |  |
|  | * Copy of pupil/parent handbook |  |

# Analysis of findings: economic *capital*

For teachers on both overseas and local contracts, the reason for working in an International School is largely financial, confirming findings from previous research by Hrycak (2015).; in particular, those leaving the UK spoke about “the bottom line” and “worsening work conditions due to poor student behaviour” one teacher suggested. Other UK leavers spoke of being “directly impacted by the 2008 economic crisis” and that International Schools seemed attractive then because they offered attractive packages such as higher salaries, accommodation, health insurance, travel home and free or discounted education for their children, as one UK trained teacher suggested:

“*I also wanted more money. It is difficult when you start as a teacher in England, to pay the rent and get a car. You are really poor. I was not able to save any money. That is what I was looking for*.”

While teachers on local contracts do not receive the same benefits in International Schools - they receive lower salaries and smaller discounts on tuition fees than overseas-contract teachers – they acknowledge that their salaries in International Schools are higher relative to non-international schools in Kuwait and throughout the International School sector. Teaching in an International School means that these local-contract teachers are not only teaching children with a higher symbolic status, they are also better compensated financially. While some overseas-contract teachers raised this issue of disparity in salaries, local-contract teachers seem to accept their situation; a number of them see it simply as ‘compensation’ for those working away from home.

For parents, choosing an International School is a means of providing greater opportunity for their children to gain financially later in life. An International School education, particularly for non-Kuwaiti and non-American families, is a way of accessing better universities overseas and ultimately accessing better paid jobs: one non-British parent suggesting that International Schooling was “like a magic wand” that created opportunities that “otherwise they could not afford”.

# Analysis of findings: mismatched *habitus*

For several teachers, the choice of International Schooling related to their mismatched *pedagogic habitus* (see above) (Grenfell, 1995): in their previous teaching posts, particularly for UK-certified teachers, they were unable to teach *and* fulfil their desired outcomes. One UK trained teacher recalls his experience in the UK:

“*Before I came over here, I had a student who poured Coca Cola all over me; I was completely drenched. It is common to be verbally abused in state schools, especially in the UK, I found. From speaking to other teachers who have worked in the UK state system before, they have had similar experiences. It is hard work teaching in the state system in the UK.”*

Additionally, UK-trained teachers suggested a lack of work-life balance ‘back home’.

“*I found that you don’t have a life when you are a teacher in the UK. My Sunday and the weekend was my planning day*.”

This finding confirms media reports and other research findings that suggest that UK teachers are leaving the UK due to their frustrations with the practice there (Hrycak, 2015; Richardson, 2016). Similarly, teachers on local contracts emphasized the higher level of professionalism and collegiality in International Schools that was lacking in local schools in Kuwait. Overall then, International Schools offer (or are perceived to offer) a better match of circumstance and personal professional need. This extends to the more general philosophical context. International Schools were established originally as means to spread global peace (Hayden and Thompson, 2013) and we found that several stakeholders referred to this. Several Kuwaiti mothers expressed dissatisfaction with the existing local social and educational offering in Kuwait, particularly with respect to rising tensions between the Shiite and Sunni religious sects.

*“I want her to learn respect of the other [because] I was raised in a home where my father is Sunni and my mother is Shiite. I never felt the difference. At the time I had my [child], the problem of discrimination started to appear in Kuwait: this person is Muslim, this person is Christian; Sunni or Shiite. I wanted* [my child] *to grow up in a neutral environment. To learn to treat people not based on nationality or religion or material worth…to treat people as human beings… To learn to respect the other because they are human. That was the main reason [for choosing an International School]. Language was not the issue.”*

Overall, parents viewed International Schools as spaces where children learn to be more tolerant of diversity.

# Analysis of findings: cultural *capital*

Our study confirmed previous research that some teachers, particularly less-experienced ones, are in part motivated by a ‘wanderlust’ when seeking out, and leaving, International School jobs (Cox, 2012; Mancuso et al., 2010). Our findings also show that International Schools not only provide a platform for gaining cultural experiences, but the economic means to do so as well. For parents and pupils, an International School education, particularly at a British-style International School, provides them with *cultural* *capital* in the various forms depicted by Bourdieu (embodied, objectified and institutionalised) (Bourdieu, 1986); for example, pupils at British-style International Schools gain UK certified qualifications (e.g. IGCSE, A-levels, music and ballet certificates), which can be treated as a form of ‘institutionalised’ cultural *capital*. More prosaically, several parents suggested in the survey that International Schooling helped:

*“prepare [their children] for the competitive market and have a better chance in future recruitment.”*

and were keen that their children learned English “with a British accent, not any English”, a form of embodied *cultural capital*, as one school leader suggested:

*[Parents] want their children to go to universities in the UK. They want them to be familiar with the language they speak, the dialect, the accent even … that is what they want. They want their children to speak and have the [right] accent.*

While these results confirm previous literature, the practice of making the choice of an International School reveals nuanced influences on people’s *habitus* and the value of *capital*.

# Analysis of findings: social *capital*

Hayden (2006) suggests that ‘new expatriates’ choose an International School relying on advice from other expatriates. Similarly, for both teacher and parent participants in this study. Word of mouth and knowing someone ‘inside’ the school was reported as being critically important, as one parent survey participant suggested:

“*My friends recommend me for this school because it was the best and oldest private school in Kuwait*.”

Several parents described the practice of asking friends about schools as “doing research” and teachers reported that they had “benefited from personal relationships with current employees” at the International School. Richardson (2016) found anecdotally that teachers in the UK are ‘knowledgeable of the International School market’, but we did not find this in our research. Some teachers had initially thought that teaching in International Schools was restricted to teaching English as a Foreign Language and they generally seem to have been uninformed of International School as a *field* and the BSO as a sub-*field*. However, the (perceived) advantages of British-style International Schools soon become apparent to teachers after taking up their posts and from talking to parents. For UK trained teachers, a British-style International School matches their pedagogic *habitus* and as a result they anticipate that there will be less of a culture shock than would be the case in other (say, American-style) International Schools, particularly in terms of organizational culture (Burke, 2017; Halicioglu, 2015; Roskell, 2013). For all the parents in this study, a British-style education is of a higher quality than an American-style one - in Kuwait, top-tiered International Schools are one or the other – not just in terms of ethos, but also in terms of curriculum and where staff were trained / qualified.

“*When I first came to the school, I was a Year 6 tutor. A parent said to me* [angry tone] *‘Your name is Nadine, where were you trained?’ I said: ‘I am British, and I have British qualifications.’ ‘Oh, ok.’ So, they trust that. They know that it is a mark of quality to be a British educator; they know our staff are mainly from the UK. That makes a big difference*.”

While British trained teachers are generally viewed by parents as delivering a better quality teaching and learning experience, some parents and pupils voice concerns. Parents note that turnover amongst British-trained teachers is higher so that increasingly, younger and less-experienced teachers are being recruited, which in turn is undermining the quality of teaching and learning. For most parents in our study, this is of particular concern for the pupils in the senior cycle at school, where stakes are higher because of forthcoming university applications. And students agree. Parents, students and managers all agree that high turnover can be explained by a mismatch in culture; in other words, that teachers feel like ‘fish out of water’ in International Schools …. as opposed to what Bourdieu called (when he was talking about ‘*habitus*’) ‘in the water’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 235).

The contrast between an American-style and a British-style education was a recurring theme in our study although earlier studies (e.g. Bunnell, 2014) questioned its importance. Parents in our study perceive a British-style education as being ‘more disciplined’ – by ‘discipline’ they mean ‘encouraging of better behaviour - than its American counterpart.

One parent: *Also, for other systems, such as the American system, we used to know relatives here who sent their daughters to an American system school. We talked to them too..., They found that the American system is a little too laid back ... In the British system, right from the start, there is discipline. There is a more uniform…*

Another parent: *“ … It’s more structured.”*

For parents and pupils, discipline and structure are attractive features of British International Schools in general. These parents are typically Arab - most are Muslim - where conservative behaviour and traditional cultural mannerisms are expected and expected to be reinforced. On the other hand, parents and students suggested that British schools as unnecessarily strict and that American (style) schools are a better alternative for the emotional well-being of their children. The fact that both American-style and British-style International Schools share the English language as the medium of instruction is not lost on parents, teachers and pupils. They are aware that it reinforces the dominancy of the English language, whether American- English or British-English, within the *field* of International Schooling. This contrast between American- and British-style International Schools is a unique finding of this study.

# Analysis of findings: symbolic *capital*, ‘Britishness’ and intellectual *capital*

Choice-making in an international school, particularly in a BSO, shows an intricate relationship between symbolic and economic *capital*. Their reputation for the quality of the education they provide - a form of symbolic *capital* - was attributed by the stakeholders in our research to many factors and was found to be closely linked to the ‘Britishness’ of the school. This had different meanings for parents and teachers. Parents saw it as favouring high standards of discipline, a traditional curriculum and well-qualified teachers. Managers and teachers saw it in terms of the high degree of correspondence with schools in the UK and with the UK system. As one teacher remarked:

*“I think [what parents want] is a British education. From speaking to parents who bring them here: they want the discipline; they want the routine. They want them to learn ‘the British way’. From the feedback I have had, they feel they get a good education, but they get that ‘personality’ as well. They like them to learn the British way; Britishness.”*

By enrolling their children at a British-style International School, despite (or because of) the fact that they typically have the highest tuition fees, they receive the social recognition and prestige symbolic *capital* attached to everyone else who chooses the same school. This acts like a multiplier effect to a school’s reputation, especially (as with our case study school) when the school itself is owned and run by a prominent / wealthy social figure in the host country. In such cases, the owner-operator of the International School brings her/his own symbolic *capital* to the school’s reputation.

International Schools like the case study one in Kuwait is not only promoted as a purveyor of high-quality British education and Britishness in a more generic sense, but also as an institution that can help its pupils gain access to some of the best universities worldwide. Figure 1 depicts the university destinations of those pupils who attended our case study school in Kuwait since 2008.

Figure 1 University destinations of Year 13 students 2008 - 2018

It shows a clear attraction towards universities in English-speaking nations. As one former student explained:

“*Obviously, British [–style International] schools are quite attractive because of universities in England. The level [of universities] such as Oxford and Cambridge. Not all of them go there, but they have quite a good reputation. To be educated in England is quite nice. Also, our school has a good record now with exams. I think parents look and say: “Ok, good exam results.” Parents [automatically] think their children can achieve similar results*.”

A-level and IGCSE results of pupils in International Schools in countries like Kuwait are published each year in high-circulation (both English and Arabic) newspapers. Such a strategy is used by schools (as it is in the UK and elsewhere) both to gain more social *capital* by marketing and attract new customers, but also as a means for parents and students to ‘present’ their own accumulated symbolic *capital*.

Of course, as a private school, an International School such as the one in Kuwait is a selective school, both socially and academically so it is hard to attribute the destination of pupil-leavers solely to the quality of teaching in the school. As one teacher remarked:

*“We have not talked about the calibre of children; our intake; the raw material if you like … Children who come from our feeder school … people who come from an outside reception, must pass a certain bar. Thereafter, anyone else who comes will go through an entrance test, which is more formal. The [school’s]* capital *is protected there. It is the foundation - the clay if you like - with which we work …We give ourselves a head start on developing children. We avoid behaviour problems.*”

The most recent Penta[[3]](#footnote-3) accreditation report graded our case study school ‘Outstanding’, but some stakeholders are suspicious of published school exam results. One teacher argued that the school has in fact lower standards than those commonly supposed:

*“International Schools should aim that 99% of students have A\* to B, rather than 100% A\* to E. It might look good to some parents, but we understand the story behind these numbers and the grade limits.*”

# Conclusion

According to Bourdieu, people’s practice within a certain *field* is related to their accumulated *capital* and *habitus*. The majority of the parents, staff and pupils at International Schools come from countries that have historically experienced colonisation or direct occupation. The majority of expatriate teachers and managers at International Schools are from the UK, in most cases the colonising state. Many countries in the Middle East, Asia and northern Africa were subjected to British rule or in the case of ‘the Gulf countries’ were under a British ‘Protectorate’ before independence. Post-colonial and neo-colonial theories have argued that the impact of colonialism is more pervasive, particularly in people’s minds, than merely as an historical fact-of-life. In those theories, International Schooling could be viewed as a tool for propagating (or prolonging) colonial values and beliefs (Wylie, 2008). Using Bourdieu’s ‘thinking tools’ in the context of post-colonial International School education extends beyond the dichotomy of ‘the coloniser’ versus ‘the colonised’ to a more nuanced understanding of social space and those stakeholders positioned within them with respect to their own *capital*. This study finds that in these circumstances ‘Britishness’ is a high-value *capital*, which echoes a recent study in an International School in Nigeria by Emenike and Plowright (2017) that found that Nigerian students view the English language as superior to their own native tongue for similar reasons. However, we would suggest that a better theorisation / conceptualisation is that in International Schools both the Britishness of the curriculum and its delivery, and the perceived inferiority of native culture and the demotion of local public education are acts of symbolic violence. Rather than viewing the propagation of International Schooling through a post-colonial lens, it could be viewed as an act of symbolic violence as a consequence of reinforcing the *doxa* or ‘taken-for-granted’ rules of the game.

The *habitus* that is both *shaped by* and *shapes* the *field*, reproduces social structures in social space. By selecting the school as a place to work or in which enrol a child, stakeholders are reinforcing the primacy of the English language over the native tongue and by suggesting that it is indeed ‘Britishness’ (in values, culture and behaviour) that is of greatest value, those stakeholders reveal what is a tacit act of symbolic violence towards non-British, non-English-speakers, including those who are BAME British. We would suggest that changes can be made in the *field* of International Schooling by exposing the complex nature of post-colonial influences in terms of curriculum and the primacy of English language instruction, and perhaps by the introduction of International Baccalaureate[[4]](#footnote-4) programmes (Hughes, 2009), although this does not address the deeper and ‘taken-for granted’ structures in the social space of these schools.

The for-profit nature of International Schooling (see, for example, Bunnell et al., 2016) is not unrelated to the issues described above. Stakeholders are aware of the commercial nature of International Schools and do not report feeling conflicted about the business imperative. Reflecting previous research (e.g. Machin, 2014), senior managers of International Schools acknowledge the conflict inherent in leading a commercial educational organisation; in particular, the prioritisation of profit over quality of teaching and learning.

*“I would like [decision-making] to be more horizontal*. *I know there are pros and cons. It’s business. Two things that probably do not go well together: we are in business and we are an education provider. But, I understand that in providing a good quality education, we are providing a product. They do not have to be antagonistic. But, when it comes to something like space: I say, right, I have this space and I can get this much bodies in this space because everybody is a fee-payer. That is the way it goes. I understand there has to be give and take.”*

The greater difficulty as expressed by our participants is the issue of International School managers recruiting younger teachers as a means of saving money despite acknowledging that one of the reasons for the success of International Schools is their reinvestment in the quality of teaching. Our findings suggest that the commercial nature of International Schools partly results in the commodification of teachers and a sense by some teachers that they were ‘disposable’. Teachers in an International School teacher form a precariat – that is to say, they form a social class of people suffering from a condition of existence (a ‘precarity’) without predictability or security – due to a lack of clarity about their employment rights and their protection in the event that they are abused (Bunnell, 2016; Poole, 2019). Again, teachers seem to understand and accept that their positions within the International Schools are ‘uncertain and shaky’. While this applies to both local and expatriate teachers, ‘expats’ earn more than ‘locals’, which makes uncertainty more palatable for expatriate teachers at a cost in terms of equitability, morale and teamwork.

*“Speaking of morale - that is an area which I feel could be improved. At times [teachers] are made to feel like children themselves. It is hard with such a large staff, but it would be great to do more things to show that they are appreciated. Any good business puts employees at Number One, but in [International Schools] they are placed third after students and parents. Teachers are often reminded of this fact.”*

Local teachers certainly think that ‘expat’ teachers find it easier generally.

*“Foreigners are a smiling people, easy to deal with. We Arabs are different. It could be that our political and societal circumstances reflect our behaviour. We have our complexes and problems due to our dire situation. They have democratic countries with many options for employment. Wherever they go, foreigners can find employment easily, whereas we cannot. They are comfortable. If you are comfortable, you can easily accept the other.”*

Symbolic violence occurs when those in power impose their legal authority, but even in an International School, management and leadership is restrained by local government policies which for example can limit school fee increases and can control the physical expansion of buildings to accommodate increases in pupil numbers. This manifests itself in greater pressure on the management of performance and tensions regarding participation in managerial roles.

“*Unless you do the job yourself, you don’t know the pressure. It is difficult to convince someone. The people in charge of timetabling will get people all the time making requests for their timetables, so if I say something, how will they believe me? It has suited me to not speak up... I am happy doing my role. I liked the balance between admin and teaching. So, I had not wanted to compromise my position by saying I want to work on something less because they might say, ok, no problem, we will get somebody else to do it. I have got to say to myself, do I want to let go of this job?*”

While teachers and parents insinuate a hierarchical structure of power exists in International Schools with ‘the few’ controlling ‘the many’, our interviews reveal the pressure on staff in International Schools to maintain a school’s distinction amongst others in the same marketplace by maintaining accreditation standards set by the UK Department of Education (DfE) and the Council of British International Schools (COBIS, 2016). We found that teacher-stakeholders see this as leading to conformity and a lack of creativity, supporting findings by Bunnell, Fertig and James in 2016, and creates a fear that the International School market will all be undermined by a divide into (on the one hand) expensive high-quality schools and (on the other) lower fees, low-quality schools, which finding supports previous research by (Azzam, 2017).

Choice-making and decision-making by parents in International Schools have important consequences for employers, employees, pupils and parents. Previous research has been limited to expatriate (mostly native English speaking) teachers and where studies *did* address the issue of local teachers working in International Schools, they were not the main focus of the study (e.g. Yue Zhang & McGrath, 2009). Furthermore, prior to this research, little was known about parental and teacher choice, or about teachers’ experience in the Middle East where there is sustained proliferation of International Schools, particularly for-profit ones, despite escalating political tensions in the region. By focusing equally on teachers in International Schools, we have discovered, for example, that staff choose International Schools as a means for gaining what can be termed ‘direct’ and ‘delayed’ economic *capital*: ‘direct’ in the case of teachers and school managers earning tax-free salaries with additional benefits spefically for UK-trained staff; ‘delayed’ in the case of parents hoping that their children will gain economic advantage through access to top universities and then better-paying jobs afterwards. International Schools also afford UK-trained teachers with the means to gain direct cultural *capital* through travel, but conversely our research shows strikingly that local teachers did not see this (the acquisition of direct cultural *capital* through travel) as a factor at all.

For-profit schooling is a contested *field* (Ball, 2015), even as it proliferates (Bunnell et al., 2016). Participants in our study were not conflicted about selecting a for-profit school, but in so doing revealed the symbolic violence of the taken-for-granted nature of the enterprise. Certainly, some teachers have reservations about how the for-profit nature of International Schools impacts on their daily-lives through increased work-loads, but generally participants accept the status quo. The alternative for them would be to find another school and that would have economic (in terms of pay) and cultural (in terms of travel, say) consequences. And of course as far as parents are concerned, greater economic benefit for expatriate teachers and managers is simply and directly an economic cost on fee-paying parents who see the causal link between fees and the quality of teaching as a threat to the current parity of esteem among International Schools. We have emphasised the symbolic violence of International Schools through the *doxa* of a taken-for-granted understanding of parents that their children are self-evidently receiving an education of a better quality than the local offering and thus an competitive advantage when applying for entry to prestigious universities, although we suggest that this is also related to the already high cultural and intellectual *capital* amongst the students themselves who are accepted into these selecting International Schools.

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1. Leadership positions in International Schools may share nomenclature, but roles vary depending on the type of school. A Head of School (also called a Superintendent or a Director) resembles a general manager. A Principal is the US equivalent of a headteacher (i.e. the head of a school division) in a UK (style) International School. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. BSO is recognised by the DfE [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Penta is a UK Department of Education (DfE) approved BSO accreditation organization [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. While International Baccalaureate schools make up a significant proportion of International Schools, most are non-IB and use English as the language of instruction (ISC, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)