UNIT 8 SCHOOLING AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PROCESS

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

Social and psychological studies have shown that individual and social factors play a role in the schooling of children. In this unit we will focus on the social factors which define the schooling experience. The unit gives an overview of the different interrelationships between socio-cultural processes and schooling. We will examine the ways in which socio-cultural factors influence schooling, and the different theoretical frameworks to understand this interaction. By schooling we mean in this unit the entire social experience of the child in school.

8.2 OBJECTIVES

At the end of the unit, you should be able to:
- describe/explain different theoretical perspectives on schooling as a socio-cultural process;
- discuss the nature of interaction between socio-cultural processes and the schooling experience;
- discuss how the social identity of the learner is implicated in his/her schooling experience; and
- discuss how schooling functions to simultaneously create continuities and disjunctions in socialisation.

8.3 SOCIO-CULTURAL PROCESSES AND SCHOOLING

To understand schooling as a socio-cultural process, we need to question how knowledge is related to society and culture. The following sections examine the relationships between society, culture and knowledge. An understanding of these relationships helps us to examine how schools act as sites for socialization of children into understanding their social world.
8.3.1 Society, Culture and Knowledge

Social Organization and Social Reproduction

No society can be considered homogenous. Social organization at the level of family, community, region and even nation is diverse and complex. It is also marked by inequalities across social class, caste and gender. The scenario is further complicated by other social variables like race, religion, ethnicity and location. We know from research conducted in different societies that these factors determine and influence social and political relations within society. How social classes or certain powerful sections continue to remain so through several generations is related to the relative social and political power wielded by these sections. Social organization is thus significant to social, political and economic reproduction in society.

Cultural Context and Knowledge

Culture is a predominant feature of human societies. There are different definitions of culture, but common to all definitions is that culture provides a terrain, a kind of map, of possible meanings with which to make sense of the world. Mediating the messages we receive around us – the sign systems within any society – are the meanings attached to them through experience. As social actors, we make meaning of these symbolic resources, be it language, visual representations, verbal communications, gestures, etc. through our previous encounters with them and importantly, through the contexts of these encounters. The status of an individual in any society– whether ascribed or chosen – is one factor, which influences how symbols are related to social structure. A child, for instance, has a definite place in any society, and her/his position, the way adults relate to her/him is not uniform across cultures and societies, or across time. Childhood is socially and historically constructed. The way in which children were socialized in nineteenth century Britain, for example, was very different from the socialization of children in India; likewise, the socialization of children in rural areas in India is different from that of urban children. These distinctions are important when one thinks of schooling and education, which are modern institutions of socialization of the young.

Knowledge is related to the socio-cultural context in a critical way. To take just one example, tribal children learn about the various environmental signals associated with the onset of rain (like movements of certain insects, flowering of plants, etc.) from immersion in a context which has an enormous fund of communal knowledge about the environment. This knowledge is critical to survival. Much of this knowledge is learned through the social processes of ‘informal’ learning. Yet, the knowledge gained from these informal processes is not considered valuable enough to be included in what children learn in school. In fact, at times, the image of the social world in textbooks provides a picture of reality quite contradictory to the experience of children outside of school.

The social distribution of power in any society is determined by what knowledge counts as being ‘relevant’; and it is those sections that are in relative positions of power in any society who can access this knowledge with relatively less effort. While this is also true of non-literate societies to some extent (although we will not deal with this here), it is far more evident in modern societies where literacy has assumed an instrumental status in social and economic mobility.

8.3.2 Schooling and Socio-cultural Processes

Schools are sites of secondary socialization. Children come to school with a distinct social experience, with a repertoire of cultural ‘resources’. Predominant among these resources are those which have to do with language, but we should understand that there are other forms of knowledge which children also bring to the social setting of
the school, gathered through the rich and extensive experience of socialization within family and community.

What is taught as part of the official curriculum of schools can be far removed from the social experience of the child. Yet, since schooling tends to view students within a homogenising framework, knowledge sought to be imparted in schools tends to be undifferentiated and uniform. This, as Kumar (1989) points out, can act to reinforce notions of 'backwardness', especially for children from marginalized and disempowered sections of society. In India, if local adaptations are to be made at all, they are usually in the form of modifications to socio-cultural contexts at the state level, which are not necessarily inclusive or sensitive to the cultural histories of disadvantaged sections in different regions of the state.

Schooling is necessarily framed by a set of normative 'ideals' which characterise the 'educated person'. These ideals are socially and historically constituted, and tend to project the belief structures of those sections which are dominant in society. A given school seeks to transmit a set of specific skills to students as well as a framework of moral character and conduct. Bernstein (1977) calls these the 'instrumental' and 'expressive' orders respectively.

Schools are not isolated, socially-blind institutions; as inherently social institutions they respond to, maintain, create, reinforce, and also have the potential to contradict socio-cultural processes in wider society. Aspects of the physical environment of the school, its location, the selection of social knowledge which goes into textbooks (the 'overt' and 'hidden' curriculum), classroom transactions, teachers' attitudes, beliefs, values, their language and classroom practice, peer interactions - these are some of the socio-cultural contexts and processes which are intrinsic to schooling.

### Check Your Progress 1

1) Differentiate between Competition and Collaboration?

2) Define Social Stereotype.
8.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS TO UNDERSTAND SCHOOLING AS A SOCIOCULTURAL PROCESS

An important question to ask is whether schooling involves only 'transmission' of a selected body of knowledge (which is rooted in the social, economic and political structures of domination and control in society), or whether this knowledge is 'co-constructed' by students through the lens of their social experience outside the school.

Let us try and understand the ideas of 'transmission' and 'co-construction'. Transmission involves a 'knower' and one who has to be taught, or the student/learner. The student is assumed to be a 'tabula rasa', a clean slate, which has to be written over with knowledge, which is typically characterized by 'facts'. Implicit in the transmission model is power—the power of the teacher who knows, and the powerlessness of the student, who does not have knowledge. In the transmission model, learning is unidirectional, from teacher to student. There are given texts which embody the knowledge to be learned, which is considered to be objective and value-neutral. The constructivist position places the learner at the centre of learning—her/his knowledge experiences are given primacy, and the role of the teacher is more of an animator or facilitator. Subjectivity is given importance and knowledge is not considered objective and free of values.

The role of schooling in the subordination of emotion to so-called rationality, leading children to adopt a technological rather than affective/emotional approach to view the social world, and their consequent dehumanization has been pointed out by several thinkers. Some important thinkers who have contributed to the criticism of schools as socio-cultural agencies are Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, John Holt and Jonathan Kozol. Freire's critique of what he termed the 'banking' model of education which intensified the disempowerment of poor marginalized sections of society led him to address the issue of an emancipatory pedagogy. Illich's belief that de-schooling would bring about a more humane society has had a profound influence on educational practitioners. In his book Deschooling Society (1970), Illich says:

> Many students, especially those who are poor, intuitively know what the schools do for them. They school them to confuse process and substance... The pupil is [thereby] "schooled" to confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence, and fluency with the ability to say something new. His [sic] imagination is "schooled" to accept service in place of value.... Health, learning, dignity, independence, and creative endeavour are defined as little more than the performance of the institutions which claim to serve these ends...

Deschooling Society (1973: 9)

Sociologists of education have examined schooling from different perspectives, such as how schools socialise the young into norms, the reproduction of social and economic relations in society and also how schools respond to and produce distinct social identities of learners. Central to the various strands of thinking on schooling as a socio-cultural process is the critical relationship between how we think of schooling as a socialising institution and its potential for how we conceptualise social change. In other words, does schooling encompass the potential to contest and alter oppressive structures in society? In this section, we will look at some of the important theoretical frameworks within the sociology of education which inform our understanding of the interactions between socio-cultural processes and schooling.
8.4.1 Structural Functionalism

A dominant paradigm within the sociology of education has been structural functionalism, which emphasizes institutional forms and consensual relationships (Parsons: 1959). This perspective provides a view of society as a system tending towards equilibrium, performing required functions of enculturation within contexts where cultural values are consensually shared. The functionalist view of schools playing an essential role in enculturating the young into accepted social norms has dominated sociological studies of education. However, the functionalist framework does not provide us with adequate answers to the question why certain norms are considered valuable or who sets these norms. For example, obedience, discipline and deference to authority (on the part of students), which are considered norms, has lead to the concept of 'deviance' as a problem. However, these norms may be questioned when education is viewed within a constructivist framework which welcomes the child's active participation in the construction of knowledge. The assumption that cultural values can be shared without any social conflict also inhibits adequate explanation of these questions. The search for placing greater emphasis on the influence of human action and conflict on aspects of social relations lay behind the development of other theories, informed by social interactionism, phenomenology, Marxist and Weberian analysis, cultural historiography and existentialist philosophy. In opposition to functionalism, many of these theories placed social conflict, over consensus, at their centre.

8.4.2 New Sociology of Education

The 'new sociology of education' that emerged with Knowledge and Control (Young, 1971) registered the shortcomings in viewing teachers and students as carriers of social roles, and drew on phenomenological traditions in sociology to expose the social construction and transmission of curricular knowledge. As Young stated in his introduction to the book: 'the primary aim...is to open up some alternative directions for sociological enquiry in education' (p.2), and that the 'major focus of the sociology of education becomes an enquiry into the social organisation of knowledge in educational institutions' (p.3). The emergence of the 'new' sociology brought in to focus the role that interpretative approaches, rather than functionalist ones, could play in the understanding of school processes. Drawing on a variety of frameworks, interpretative approaches are characterised by 1) an opposition to structural functionalism; 2) a view of individuals as creators of meanings; 3) a focus on the assumptions underlying social order, together with the treatment of social categories as problematic; 4) a distrust of quantification and the use of 'objective' categories and 5) a focus on the transmission and acquisition of interpretative procedures (Bernstein: 1977).

A significant contribution to interpretative sociology comes from Goffman's dramaturgical sociological perspective in anthropological research. In this he uses the idea of 'performance' in social situations, in which participants intersubjectively construct a collective meaning of the situation which involves 'not so much a real agreement as to what exists but rather a real agreement as to whose claims concerning what issues will be temporarily honoured' (Goffman: 1971:23).

Symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, two important strands within interpretative sociology, have had a significant impact on studies of schooling. By linking human action with modes of linguistic and cultural expression and placing emphasis on the role of human subjectivity, interactionism and ethnomethodology enable an 'internal' perspective on the educational 'subject' and her/his community, as well as the dynamics of knowing in their relationship.

School-based research within the interpretative framework has examined the ways by which those involved in education construct, define and manage their everyday world.
The organization of schools, ideologies of teachers, and the nature of school knowledge are given emphasis in such research. Keddie’s (1971) study on classroom knowledge, for example, examined the categories used to understand student failure in a streamed classroom. She showed that categories like ‘low/high ability’ and ‘deviance’, although apparently consensually maintained, are played out in interactional contexts in the classroom between teachers and students and among students, and linked to the unequal distribution of power.

### Check Your Progress 2

3) **What is Co-construction model of teaching?**

4) **What does the new sociology say about School Process?**

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### 8.4.3 Social and Cultural Reproduction

Marxist theories, with their emphasis on class relations, strongly influenced studies of education. Bowles and Gintis (1976), for example, tried to examine the role played by schooling in capitalist society. They looked at the relationship between the capitalist economy and schooling, and how the latter helped to reproduce class relations within capitalism by placing children into class-specific occupations in the capitalist economy. Neo-Marxist frameworks challenged the idea of students as passive recipients of an overarching economic agenda through schooling, and attempted to look at the linkages between everyday school practices and the larger structures of power engendering several significant interpretations.

Also, moving beyond phenomenological description and analysis of social processes within schooling, neo-Marxist frameworks examine the role that institutions and structures which embody power in the social, economic and political spheres play in the organisation of schooling, social relations within the school, constructions of school knowledge, and the identity of social actors or factors within the context of schooling. In contrast to earlier phenomenological and ethnomethodological studies, which attempted to show how reality was sustained by participants at the micro-level, the larger economic and political context of construction of knowledge are prominent in these frameworks.

The major theories addressing the place of education in the reproduction of values in society were those of social and cultural reproduction. Although these theories cast a radically new frame within which to analyse schooling and school knowledge, they have been critiqued on several counts. Social reproduction theorists like Althusser
Social Context of School

(1971) and Bowles and Gintis (1976) addressed quite specifically the reproduction, through schooling, of the structures and social relations of capitalist society. Althusser viewed schooling as an 'ideological state apparatus', embodying ideology materially (in the form of rituals, practices and social processes), and representations that structure the consciousness of students. The 'correspondence principle' of Bowles and Gintis draws parallels between the hierarchically structured patterns of values, norms and skills that characterise the work force in capitalist society and the dynamics of classrooms. Although this work was the first to highlight the importance of the 'hidden curriculum' in reproducing social relations through schooling, it has been critiqued for a variety of reasons, primarily because of its deterministic approach to complex social realities. Bowles' and Gintis' work, while pathbreaking, has been criticised for overdetermining the influence of economic factors on schooling (see Apple, 1982).

Cultural reproduction theorists such as Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) and Bernstein (1977, 1985) freed the idea of reproduction from the confines of a deterministic Marxist framework by introducing key concepts which made a considerable contribution to the study of curriculum. 'Cultural capital' and 'habitus' were central to Bourdieu and Passeron's framework. By 'cultural capital', Bourdieu refers to the different sets of linguistic and cultural competencies that individuals inherit by way of the class-located boundaries of their families. A child inherits from her/his family those sets of meanings, qualities of style, modes of thinking, and types of disposition that are accorded a certain social value and status as a result of what the dominant class or classes label as the most valued. Habitus relates to those 'subjective dispositions which reflect a class-based social grammar of taste, knowledge and behaviours inscribed permanently in the body schema and the schemes of thought of each developing person' (Bourdieu and Passeron:1977:15). These dispositions structure social experiences which reproduce the same objective structures.

A theory of cultural transmission was the central point of Bernstein's analysis of education and the role it plays in the reproduction of class relationships. According to Bernstein, schools embody an educational code which structures the school experience and plays an important part in organising the manner in which authority and power are mediated through all aspects of school experience. The dominant educational code consists of a collection code and an integrated code, whose meanings are directly related to the concepts of classification and framing. Classification refers to the relationships— the strength or weakness in the construction and maintenance of the boundaries that exist — between different categories, contents and so on. Framing refers to the 'degree of control teacher and pupil possess over selection, organisation, pacing and timing of the knowledge transmitted and received in the pedagogical relationship' (Bernstein:1977:89). These concepts can be strong or weak in different combinations, which in turn define the dominant educational code of the pedagogical relationship. The collection code refers to strong classification and framing whereas the integrated code is characterised by weak classification and framing. The integrated code contains more possibility for progressive ideology.

8.4.4 Accommodation and Resistance

Cultural reproduction theories have been critiqued for their over-emphasis on class as a social category, and not adequately allowing in their conceptual framework the possibilities for conflict and contradiction. The perspective of schools as institutions with 'relative autonomy' comes from the Gramscian notion of hegemony. Gramsci (1971:57-8), moving away from a deterministic conception of the state, viewed it as a terrain of continuing conflicts and contradictions. The Gramscian perspective enables not only an understanding of ideological transmission, but also resistance to dominant (hegemonic) ideologies, by developing what he terms a 'contradictory consciousness'. Ideology, according to Gramsci, is not a system of ideas but a 'condition that is
implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life' (Hall: 1988:55), a 'mental framework... which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works' (Hall: 1996: 26).

One criticism of the traditional reproduction model has been that it takes a far too flat view of individual and collective ability to contest enforcement of norms. Where does the 'agency' of social actors— the ability to adapt and accept, question, contest and change transmitted knowledge — fit into an understanding of schooling as a socio-cultural process? Individual and collective processes of accommodation and resistance to dominant ideologies found expression in several researches in education in the 70s and 80s, chiefly in Britain and the United States. Using ethnographic methods, these studies captured the nuanced complexity of resistance in classrooms and schools. Willis's *Learning to Labour* (1977) explored the school experiences of working class youth’s resistance to dominant ideologies of schooling which emphasised mental labour and gentility. In this path-breaking study, he showed how these young 'lads' constructed a counter-culture based on their own social experiences of being working class. In doing this, they 'resisted' the dominant cultural code of gentility (calling the eager students who unquestioningly accepted what teachers taught as 'earholes') and also *produced* themselves as working-class. Willis’s path-breaking work shifted the theoretical emphasis from cultural reproduction to cultural production.

We can perhaps think of equivalent situations in the Indian context. For example, in coeducational schools, girls are often upheld as being ideal students due to their supposed docility which makes them 'fit' the image of the obedient, non-disruptive student in the classroom. Girls accommodate to this ideology, but also resist it using subtle and subversive tactics, like stitching, drawing, etc. which do not disturb the equilibrium of the class room but which could also be considered 'disruptive' to learning (Bhattacharjee, 1999).

### 8.4.5 Feminist Theories

In the Euro-American context, feminist scholarship on schooling and curriculum has followed two distinct traditions. Liberal feminist approaches, while documenting gender discrimination in textbooks and school practices, did not place their findings within an analysis of society and the economy. Socialist feminists, on the other hand, make the primary assumption that schooling is connected to class structure and the economy (capitalist), and that capitalism and patriarchy are related and mutually reinforcing. Within the latter, there have been severe critiques of traditional Marxist theory, basically directed towards its emphasis on class analysis, which tends to make gender invisible. Moreover, feminist critiques of the theories of social and cultural reproduction have largely been addressed to the manner in which gender is seen as *subordinate* to class. By not addressing women as productive agents, there is an assumption of the fixity of gender roles. Although critical feminist theorists have borrowed key concepts from reproduction theories, these concepts have been re-worked into new formulations which give primacy to women's experience and address their subordination. Macdonald (1980) for example, extends Bernstein's concept of 'code' to the construction of dominant gender codes in schools— patterns of practices that construct gender in everyday school life.

Resistance theories which embody these possibilities, have also been used in feminist educational research. Key works are by McRobbie (1978) and Anyon (1980,1983). McRobbie, in an ethnographic study, showed how working-class girls resisted the dominant ideology of the educated woman, through displays of 'unacceptable' femininity. Anyon examined the hidden curriculum of work in four schools differentiated by the socio-economic class of students. Her study showed that the girls both resisted and accommodated to dominant norms in ways that mirrored their class positions.
By shifting the focus from class as a sole determining factor in the development of consciousness and a unitary explanatory variable, as well as questioning the economy as the only site where educational conflicts have meaning, feminist theorising has enabled the identification of other absences in educational theory and research, such as race and ethnicity, and enlarged the arena of conflict to the cultural and political, and to both public and private spheres.

The theoretical formulations outlined above provide us frameworks within which to examine the ways in which schooling acts as a socio-cultural process. Schools act to socialise students, by the ways in which they mirror the social, economic and political realities outside of the school through selection of knowledge, and everyday practices and social relations. On the other hand, within schools, students themselves also construct knowledge about the social world. Within specific sociohistorical contexts, we can see that different meanings are produced within schooling processes.

### Check Your Progress 3

5) What is the significance of critical pedagogy?

6) What was the major finding of Anyon's work?

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### 8.5 SCHOOLING AS A SOCIO-CULTURAL PROCESS: SOME EXAMPLES

In the above section we looked at the various frameworks by which we can understand how schooling can be seen in socio-cultural context. We have briefly addressed the role played by official knowledge and patterns of interaction which characterise schooling as a socio-cultural process. We now turn to the ways in which socio-cultural processes influence schooling.

Some factors intrinsic to the schooling experience which carry the imprint of socio-cultural influences are:

- Content of textbooks (selection of material, language used, representations of different communities, genders, etc.)
- Aspects of the physical and social organization of the school such as seating patterns, task assignation by teachers, etc. (Can you think of some other ways?)
- The ways in which behaviour is perceived, monitored and controlled.
— Teachers’ expectations, systems of rewards and punishments, labeling patterns, verbal and non-verbal communication.

By way of example, let us look at the category of gender. We know that girls in the Indian context are socialized within a classical patriarchal framework which emphasizes submission to authority, acceptance and adherence to norms based on gender inequality and an awareness of their supposedly innate inferiority, both biological and cultural. Schooling acts to reinforce these forms, through a range of processes. The official knowledge of textbooks often render women invisible or portrays them in stereotyped roles. Teachers, whose own value structures may mirror the larger social view of gender, are likely to reinforce gender distinctions through their verbal and non-verbal communication patterns and practices in different interactional contexts within the school – the classroom, common spaces like assembly halls and playgrounds, etc. The way routines are structured in the school also reflect gender difference. For example, it is often observed in Indian schools that girls are responsible for cleaning up the premises, while boys are sent for outside tasks. Many studies have shown how adult gender stereotypes model traditional gender role behaviour in the classroom. For example, boys take up more ‘teacher time’, since they tend to be seen as more ‘disruptive’. There is differential focus on boys for misconduct, remediation or other forms of behavioural control. Male teachers tend to adopt a more authoritarian and instrumental teaching style, whereas female teachers use a more supportive and expressive style. Children also tend to engage in social interactions in the school which reflect their gendered socialization. The relationship of gender discrimination within schooling to larger socio-cultural processes has been documented in various studies. What is important to note, however, is that these processes will vary by the location and type of school, the background of children and teachers, etc. In other words, it is difficult to examine gender issues in schooling without looking at class, caste, religion and ethnicity.

Patterns of social discrimination can be insidious and subtle. Documented experiences of Dalit children in schools show that socio-cultural taboos associated with purity pollution affect social transactions in schools. The schooling experience of dalit children exemplifies the ways in which external factors impact education. In the rural context, Dalits are predominantly poor and landless labourers. Studies have shown how discrimination operates on Dalit children through a range of factors. The location of a school in a village, for example, sends out a clear message about who gets included in local institutions of formal education. Villages are usually structured on caste and community lines. Dalit bastis are usually located at some distance from upper caste habitations—often on the periphery of the village. Children from these communities have to walk the distance to the schools which are usually located in the upper-caste regions of the village. This acts as a disincentive for communities which are oppressed socially in the village setting. Once in school, the organization of the classroom, where Dalit children often are made to sit separately from upper caste children and treated as polluting (a carry over from social relations outside of the school and predominantly upper caste teachers’ beliefs and classroom practices). Dalit children are dissuaded (if not prevented) from using common water glasses in schools, and there are often different glasses reserved for them.

Tribal hamlets are located in sparsely populated areas, with low provision of schooling facilities. The medium of instruction and language used within schools is not the local language familiar to children, leading many to drop out of school. The self-image that children acquire has a lot to do with the way they are socialised in school through the curriculum. Kumar (1989) makes the point that scheduled caste children are caught in a circle of underdevelopment as textbooks and teachers deny their own histories and memories of community pride through the absence and sometimes even denigration of their contexts. A classic example of official knowledge insidiously
undermining tribal identity is a question found in a textbook: Where are adivasis found? (as against where do they live) (cited in Rampal, 2002).

What we have outlined for the categories of gender, caste and ethnicity also apply to other social categories. Schooling reflects the world views of dominant sections (in the case of India, upper caste/class, Hindu, urban, male). Nonetheless, we must also remember that schooling offers a space for struggle and resistance to the dominance (and oppression) of these groups, and opportunities for action to empower marginalized sections. Significant examples in the Indian context are the growth of early nationalist consciousness under colonial rule, the emergence of a distinct Dalit consciousness under Phule and later Ambedkar, and women asserting their right to education.

8.6 LET'S SUM UP

Schooling carries the imprint of wider social relations. Schooling acts to enculturate but also tends to reinforce discrimination and inequality. At the same time, as sites of cultural production, schooling also has the potential to create resistance to dominance and oppression.

8.7 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS


