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# **Sociological Perspectives on Everyday Life and The Social Construction of School Failure: A Literature Review**

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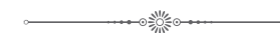
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## Sociological Perspectives on Everyday Life and The Social Construction of School Failure: A Literature Review

Amman Madan and Ananya Pathak



**Abstract:** *The sociological study of everyday life has developed largely around four major interconnected theoretical streams: symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical sociology, ethnomethodology and phenomenological sociology. Scholars who combine these with the study of social inequality have developed several ways of seeing how school failure gets created in everyday life. They have pointed to the importance of how oppressed and exploited communities look at education, at the relations of power in pedagogy and curricula, how students internalize ways of looking at class life that come from their social location and so on. These lead to both the reproduction of social inequality as well as resistances to it. Indian studies of the everyday life of schools are influenced by several of these theoretical perspectives. However, only a few studies have used them to explore how school failure gets socially constructed in the classroom. They tell us of the importance of designing curricula and pedagogies which connect with the knowledges, senses of the self and interactional modes of less powerful communities. Work in this area is underdeveloped and fragmented. While we have some insightful studies and theoretical perspectives to guide us in our interventions, there are also gaps and blind spots.*

**Keywords:** *micro-sociology, education, everyday life, social inequality, school failure, interpretive sociology.*

# Sociological Perspectives on Everyday Life and The Social Construction of School Failure: A Literature Review

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## Introduction

The sociological and anthropological study of everyday life has led to important insights in education which have the potential to suggest new curricular and pedagogical practices. The study of everyday life has delineated a domain of analysis, which common-sense worldviews may not be able to address. It has also added substantially to the imaginaries of the older macro-sociological theories of social life and education. The conceptual ability to connect the “micro” with the “macro” has helped us to better understand how broader social structures such as those created by social stratification, capitalism, rationalization, state formations and so on operate at many levels in education and also how they are negotiated with at each of those levels. Studies using such perspectives are slowly beginning to emerge in India. Regional and cultural specificity are a key issue in how we interpret and negotiate meanings and how these interplay with contexts. Work done in one set of cultures may be of limited use in others. If an integrated understanding of how reflexivity, interpretation, institutions and social structures work together is indeed a valuable one for improving the education system, then it is important to expand the insights available from South Asia. This paper is a small attempt to help in that process. It will begin by delineating some of the major theoretical perspectives which have contributed to our understanding of everyday life and then will go on to review the existing literature done using such perspectives in India. The next section will examine studies that have focused specifically on school success and failure here. Since work in this tradition is at a nascent stage in this region, the paper will conclude by suggesting some key issues and questions that may deserve being taken up.

Assessments are a key site which leads to social exclusion, being the points where disillusionment and a sense of not being good enough gets triggered. It is easy to see assessments as nothing more than tools for social structures to write failure upon the disprivileged. However, that may not give us a complete picture of the role and potential of assessments. Classroom assessments (formative assessment) and end-of-the year assessments (summative assessment) can both be said to be important for the growth of students. Terry Crooks (1988) reviewed a number of studies of

classroom assessments and argued that when done in certain manners they make a substantial contribution to students' learning. However, there can also be forms of assessment which actually contradict and diminish the educational goals of schools and higher education. This is particularly a concern in today's times when accountability discourses (cf., Madan, 2012) run the risk of making us lose sight of how better learning actually takes place (Crooks, 2011). In a seminal paper, Royce Sadler (1989) argues that assessment cannot be done to students, they must be willing participants of it. Students need to themselves believe that learning is important and have clear pictures of what needs to be done to increase their learning. The study of the lived experiences of schools can provide significant insights into the meaning-driven process of assessment and can also help us to understand how and why it gets derailed.

The notions of examinations, assessments and merit/failure have a strong cultural grip on the education system in India. Failure may have far reaching consequences for the learner concerned, including psychological trauma, peer group stigmatisation, reduced accessibility to well-paying/dominant positions in the economic ladder in adult life. The educational culture that sees summative assessment in the form of the end of the year examinations as the sole indicator of ability may lead to the legitimization of social structures that have inbuilt inequalities. Similarly, classroom assessment may arbitrarily privilege elite cultures and lead to the reproduction of their grip on a community.

The role of education systems in social reproduction and maintaining a social structure is well known (Bowles and Gintis, 1976, Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). This contradicts discourses of modernity which promote narratives that education can be a means of social change and can provide opportunities for changing social locations and can create better citizens and human beings (Boli et al., 1985). The structural conditions within which education operates can pull in different directions from the emancipatory narratives of education. In a social structure with systemic inequalities, the imperative of social reproduction may mean "cooling-out" a number of people by telling them that they are not good enough to get the higher jobs and positions (Clark, 1960, Hopper, 1968). The education system here works in a manner that excludes and discards the vast majority of the seats of power and privilege. One of the roles which assessment systems play in such a situation is to label students and certify their exclusion. This may work in conjunction with economic, political and cultural processes to build the layers of a stratification system.

The education system is one way of building legitimacy for social dispensations and that legitimacy helps to defuse opposition by those denied power. For instance, one aspect of India's changing social structure is the decline of agrarian work and the lower levels of income and security which the children of farmers are experiencing. An oft-heard remark about these children is that they were not good in studies or else they too would have become engineers and managers like others. This shifts the fault from the social structure to them. A clearer understanding of how the social structure is working would help to understand that such statements wrongly justify the status quo. They legitimize the continued presence of children from privileged social groups in disproportionate numbers in the higher levels of the stratification system. When we ignore the

balance of power which has led agriculture to decline and which has failed to create sufficient alternate educational and work opportunities for upward mobility then we are unwittingly helping to legitimize a particular social structure. That is also what we do when we ignore the cultural politics of curricula, pedagogy and assessment, which converts the ways of the powerful into the established, hegemonic practices of schools and universities. The education system becomes the legitimate excuse for leaving people out. Meanwhile, the teachers and administrators of a collapsing government school system also become convenient fall-guys on whom the blame can be pinned.

Thinking of schools as nothing but a means of social reproduction, however, would be inaccurate. Social relations are changing and so are institutions like schools and universities. They are better seen as places where tugs of war are taking place than as machines that churn out automatons. They are sites of many resistances and oppositions. The forces which seek a different relationship between education, freedom and social structure range from organized educational philosophies and political movements to individual learners who struggle in their own minds to create more meaningful interpretations of the curriculum.

The integration of perspectives of social structures and of everyday life can help in looking at assessment, among other aspects of education, in newer and different ways. Theoretical attempts to build a macro-micro integration and a structure-agency perspective offer powerful insights for those who believe that contemporary education should create a level playing ground rather than freeze existing social inequalities. The present literature review surveys the existing work in India that uses the theoretical perspectives developed in sociology and anthropology which examine everyday life. Without claiming to do a fully exhaustive survey that lists each and every paper, book or dissertation done in this area, it tries to delineate the contours and perspectives present in the work done around school failure, agency and resistance. It will try to identify the major theoretical perspectives which have been built around this area. It will also try to identify the specific explanations which have been for school success and failure in India. It will not try to recommend specific solutions but will try to identify key questions and areas of work which are more relevant to this part of the world. It is hoped that this will help those who plan further theoretical and empirical work here.

### **Theoretical Perspectives in Sociology of the Everyday**

The sociological and anthropological understanding of education has been drastically transformed by the rise of theoretical perspectives which focus upon the everyday. Several intellectual and political strands came together to shape this over the last two generations. Three of them can be readily identified: (a) One strand has emphasized the way the self is constructed through interactions. The student's self grows through seeing how others look at her and by reflecting upon how to feel about that. The self of the student may then grow in the direction of thriving on challenges or may slip into despondence and give up whenever faced with an uphill task. Such ideas come particularly from American pragmatism as expressed in the symbolic interactionism of George Herbert Mead and

Herbert Blumer, amongst others, and have inspired many to examine the construction of the self as well as the inner conversations which shape it. (b) A second strand has been to look not at the self as much as at the ways in which we interact and negotiate with others to construct our relationships with them. The teacher's work is seen as a continuous negotiation of impressions with students, colleagues, the administration and parents. Assessment rests upon a cultural recognition of what is expected in an interaction and upon knowledge of the practices of an appropriate response. Such a concern with interaction orders can be seen in the dramaturgical sociology founded by Erving Goffman and in a somewhat different way in the ethnomethodology of Harold Garfinkel and Aaron Cicourel. (c) A third source of influence has been around how valid knowledge is constructed and how certain kinds of responses are interpreted and what gets seen as legitimate. This draws from the phenomenological work of Alfred Schutz and its influence through the seminal writings of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. These traditions have combined with several other theoretical influences to develop concepts and perspectives that help us to understand and act in the everyday life of schools and universities. They become a vital toolkit for intervening in education at multiple levels, from face to face relations to policymaking. In their early days they tended to shun the idea of social structure, insisting that the everyday was the only reality that we should concern ourselves with. Nowadays, however, the sociological imagination takes a more integrated perspective, combining a macro-micro (e.g., Stryker, 2006) and a structure-agency (e.g., Giddens, 1984, 1993) perspective to see how everyday life reproduces as well as challenges the social structure. A brief outline of the main concepts and perspectives which may be useful in guiding research on school failure is presented below, which is later used to examine the work done so far in India.

### *The Self and Inner Conversations*

The symbolic interactionist tradition helps us to visualize the "self" and to see how it is being continuously built and rebuilt through interactions with our immediate environment using symbols. Its emphasis is on the self and its inner conversations with the mirrored reflections of how others look at us. This gives us important concepts with which to understand the dynamics of the teacher's identity. It helps us to begin to see how a student develops a liking or distaste for a school subject. Using its concepts, we begin to understand how the stress of an examination can completely distort and change the meaning of a learning experience. This tradition draws upon the work of pragmatists such as Henry James and John Dewey and develops into a symbolic interactionist perspective (C. H. Cooley, W. I. Thomas, Herbert Blumer) which goes on to influence a number of sociological studies of the everyday life of schools (e.g., Peter Woods, David Hargreaves).

The work of George Herbert Mead (1934) is a classic statement of this way of studying the self and its inner conversations. He stands squarely in the pragmatist tradition and offers a way of seeing all human activity, including the teaching and learning that occurs in schools, as a continuous process of the construction of meanings and symbols through engagement with the world. We are not born with a knowledge of mathematics or with likes and dislikes of teachers. These are all gradually built by us through our interactions. The "self" was a centrally important concept

for Mead, and he believed it got created, through a reflective engagement with our environment, particularly our social environment. Lower animals didn't have a self and nor were children born with it. The self did not get formed by some kind of innate unfolding, he believed. Instead, it was built gradually by the thoughtful, interactions of a person which eventually transformed that self. Our inner conversations played a crucial role in this.

An important concept which Charles H. Cooley (1902: 151-153) had articulated was that we have a looking-glass self. In any social interaction we picture how others look at us and that is the basis of our response to them. The way we respond to others' images of us contributes to shaping our self. The self gets constituted on the basis of social relations and interaction with others in an organised social environment. The child who enters kindergarten and wanders about the classroom instead of sitting at one place begins to realize that the teacher does not approve of this. This recognition leads to reflections in which the child may go in the direction of wanting to do things which win the affection of the teacher or in another direction which says she does not care what the teacher thinks. It is such a process of noting how others look at one and building one's own response to it which builds the self over innumerable reiterations. The same process can build the teacher's pet at one extreme and the angry rebel at the other.

Mead said that the self is built through a continuous interaction between the "me" and the "I". We learned what we were expected to do through social relationships. This was the "me" that people wanted to see. Meanwhile, there was a pre-existing "I" which had been created over time. This was reflective and did not just act in a mechanical manner. We were essentially unpredictable in our responses and no one really knew how a person would behave in a particular instant of responding to how the "me" was supposed to behave. Mead gave the example (ibid., 175) of the ballplayer who had internalized the "me" which was an expectation to throw the ball in a particular direction. But even at that moment, no one could say if the ballplayer would indeed do exactly that. The "I" might decide to spin the ball or to toss it high in the sky. Changes that were introduced in the social universe were generated by the "I". The attitudes of the 'others' were responsible for making up the organised "me" and the mechanism through which one responds is the "I". The "I" was the creative, free, unpredictable aspect of human existence.

A distinguishing feature of the self is that thus that it could become an object for itself. It had the capacity to be aware of not just others, but also itself. Further, it had the ability to reflect upon itself in a creative manner, rethinking and reworking what it sees. The self was able to analyse itself and reflect upon itself. We continually had inner conversations, and these shaped what we did. Such concepts from the symbolic interactionist perspective help to see that capitalism, caste, patriarchy do not act upon us in a direct and mechanical way. We are continually interpreting what others expect from us and our inner conversations shape our eventual responses.

In the domain of education and in the classroom in particular, the theory of Mead gains a new relevance because it enables us to see that each learner's self-perception / level of confidence / shyness-assertiveness / participation-withdrawal / introvert-extrovert character are not merely

a result of the immediate stimulus alone but become parts of their personalities gradually as they interact with other people at home, among friends, in the neighbourhood, in the marketplace or at school. What they have been made to believe about their own abilities and failures, what they have been motivated or pulled down about, the choices they have been allowed to make or leave untouched in the process of social interactions shape their notions about themselves and shape their behaviour towards the world at large. This reminds us of the fact that the performance that a child shows in a classroom is not determined by only how intellectually capable or incapable she is but also by the social relations and the inner conversations that have created the child's own sense of being. We begin to ask - was the child encouraged to doubt or trust her capabilities, does she have a positive or negative self-image, how does the child visualise herself in the context of others in her class? These collectively have a role to play in the self that the child brings to the class and the self that further evolves in a series of interactions thereafter. This approach cautions us of the myriad ways in which the child's self is shaped and the great need to understand the environments and processes by which the performance of a child is shaped. There are countless ways in which the environment, the interactions and the stimuli that one receives from the world around shape the child who enters the classroom and gets shaped by the process of schooling. It is for this reason that an understanding of symbolic interactionism enables us to understand student identity formation, classroom dynamics among students and between the teacher and the student, the play of power and agency, the creation of the counterculture in the school and so on.

### *Faces and Negotiations*

Where the symbolic interactionist tradition has looked mainly within the self and the individual's identity, a distinct tradition has evolved which looks at the interactions between people. The study of the "interaction order" draws our attention to the many actions - meaning-laden gestures, silences and so on - which we use in the everyday acts of classrooms, teachers and students and to the way they build our selves and our achievements. A classic work in this tradition is Erving Goffman's (1956, 1963) dramaturgical sociology. Goffman moved his focus from the self into the ways that the self gets presented to others. He argued that few had the time to get to know others' true selves before a social transaction took place. We therefore developed a series of "fronts" and "routines" by which others could recognize us. The teacher who came into class with a friendly and yet crisp manner was signalling to his students what to expect of him. The students conveyed to the teacher their willingness to obey through their silences and the promptness of their compliance to his instructions. The self might have its own inner life and struggles, but people acted and interpreted each other through reading each other's gestures and faces, not through a direct peep into each other's selves.

The social site which Goffman was particularly interested in was the interaction or the encounter. He said that we gradually learned to bring out a number of faces by which we conveyed how we wanted to be seen. Part of what students learned while going to school was the acceptable kind of

faces which one had to put on in these sites. They learned, for instance, that if you were listening to a lecture in the classroom, you had to keep scribbling in your notebook. If you did not give the appearance of taking notes you got into trouble with the teacher. To take another example, the teacher may find out that an expression of calm confidence helped in overcoming student grumbling. If one looked tentative and unsure while giving difficult tasks that could increase students' resistance and opposition. Occupations like teaching called for presenting certain accepted routines or styles of behaviour which the audience could understand and interpret in a desired direction. A teacher who joked about too much with students could lose her authority and students might stop following her guidance in class.

Goffman said that negotiations were an important and ubiquitous aspect of all encounters. We tried to control a situation by putting up certain faces and certain routines. To do this we had to negotiate with the other person who too was trying to assert his own interpretation of the situation and to control it in his own way. Students from socially oppressed groups learned that the best response to a teacher from a socially dominant group was to be silent before him. Staying quiet and avoiding making any responses to the teacher kept you out of trouble while at the same time giving you your own little world where the teacher was unable to really penetrate.

Instead of Mead's integrated self the picture Goffman paints is a fragmented one. We have a repertoire of different styles from which we pick one or the other at different times. The self is conflicted and contradicted entity. Schools are a site for many struggles where teachers, students, administrators and parents negotiate to define situations according to their respective desires to be in control of an encounter. The Goffmanesque view of people is one of a continuous series of struggles and negotiations, not one of a peaceful, quiescent social self. In the work of David Hargreaves (1975) and Peter Woods (1979) and Jeffrey (2002) amongst many others, such a Goffmanesque negotiation can be seen in the social life of schools.

### *Folk Practices of Cognition and Account Giving*

Where Goffman highlighted the interactional tugs between people, which pull a situation in different directions, the work of ethnomethodologists has pointed to another aspect of the interactional order. They are interested in the ways by which order is maintained in everyday life. In the chaos of the million events which occur every moment, we are still able to understand each other, and the teacher is able to hold the attention of a classful of students and get them to follow a maths problem on the blackboard. Ethnomethodology is about the methods by which people make order and sense out of the rush of events. Learning those "methodic practices", as the ethnomethodologists called them, is necessary if you want to fit into a classroom. Conversely, the ones who come from somewhat cultural backgrounds and do not know what a teacher means by a particular tone of voice are the ones who begin to get into trouble. Or they may be the ones who do not know that a 2-marks question must be answered in this particular way and not that.

Harold Garfinkel (1967) is one of the key contributors to ethnomethodology, along with Aaron Cicourel (1974). Garfinkel argued that the social order of human life – including the school – is continually being built and maintained through certain kinds of activities. The micro-social order does not get derived from the social structure, indeed he questioned whether it was meaningful to talk of the social structure at all. All that is happening in reality is our actual lived life and the methodic practices through which we order it. Human beings were not “cultural dopes” he famously said, who followed the orders of the system. Instead, they had their own reflexive processes of making sense of things and doing them. The ethnomethodologists were interested mainly in grasping those processes. This meant identifying the subtle cues and signals which teachers gave in the classroom, the kind of language they were looking in assessments and so on. The classroom cues were the ways of guiding classroom behaviour (Payne 1976). The phrases and terms they saw in the answer-sheet were their ways of identifying whether students had “learned” or not.

The accounts which people gave of their own activities were of special importance. Just as in a business, out of all the things which were happening the most important for the businessman was the accounts-keeping, so in other situations the most important were the kinds of accounts people presented of what they were doing. These accounts were what people paid attention to and these were what kept a social order going. On the other hand, if one were not presenting the right kinds of accounts, then the other party in the interaction would not know what to make of us. The classroom or end of the year assessment was a classic accountability moment. One may have learned or not learned something, but for the institution what was important was whether appropriate accounts of the learning had been presented in these assessments or not.

The catch has been that all accounts rest upon certain accepted kinds of “documentation”. People generate appropriate kinds of “documents” – markers of having learned in a school setting, or symptoms of being normal in an asylum and so on. The institution’s functioning rests upon getting the right kinds of documents so that it can take decisions on who gets a higher grade and who fails. The study of the accounts and documents which people use in interactions has been the empirical focus of much of ethnomethodology. In the form of conversational analysis, discourse analysis and so on, this has identified the way silences and looks, and the subtlest uses of language serve to maintain a social order. Those who are unable to provide the right accounts are the ones who are targeted with sanctions to either fall in line or get left out. An important caution that ethnomethodology can offer to assessment is that it rests upon methodic practices that are part of a cultural pattern. Like other kinds of social life, assessment too does not have a direct access to reality. The methodical practices which it recognizes must be learned through some kind of socialization. Those who are unfamiliar with the accounts-presenting practices – the performativity – of a particular situation may be the ones who attract negative sanctions, irrespective of what the reality may be of their knowledge and abilities.

### *Typificatory Schemes and The Construction of School Reality*

Ethnomethodology through its detailed studies of accounts-giving, performativity and documentary practices give us many insights into what happens in the classroom, during an examination, in the act of learning and so on. A linked, but somewhat different approach focuses on how people’s everyday knowledge gets constructed. This shares similar roots with ethnomethodology, both being inspired by Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, which began to inquire into how knowledge got constructed, bracketing the question of reality to instead identify purely the conditions of the construction of our interpretations of it. Alfred Schutz’s injunction to look at the everyday, in particular, is taken up to ask questions like how teachers view and categorize students, how students make meaning out of what is being said in the classroom and so on. Where symbolic interactionism’s emphasis is on the dialogic construction of the self and dramaturgical sociology’s on the negotiation of fronts and ethnomethodology’s on presenting of accounts, the work we now turn to pays a little more attention to the ways in which meanings and emotions are constructed by people. It has often been called a phenomenological sociology.

The work of Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) is a classic in this tradition. They argue that social experiences build a sense of reality for every individual. There may be different kinds of subjective perceptions of reality, ranging from the paramount one of an individual’s typical day at work to that provided by a night at the movies or by an intense religious experience. We get from our society already existing ways of feeling, of building categories to relate with daily experiences, and of acting upon them. We also innovate upon these as we go along, though the quantum of energy needed for that that innovation rises dramatically with the scale of the change we attempt. Typificatory schemes and recipes for action are of special interest to this kind of phenomenological sociology. The ways in which teachers categorize different kinds of students and then the ways in which they teach to the different kinds, for instance, is what would be studied. The “commonsense” of the teacher and the pupils’ life is sought to be identified along with the ways in which it gets constructed. It is in our everyday life, through mirror-self reflections and the sharing of cultural notions embedded in language that we develop typificatory schemes and recipes for action. However, these also get “sedimented” with time and begin to get more and more fixed. They may make a transition into role definitions which institutions require for their functioning. These then in turn become the objective conditions which exert an influence on our subjectivity. As Berger and Luckman put it (ibid., p. 249) there is a dialectic between our subjectivity, its externalization and the objectivation of our social life.

To maintain an individual’s sense of reality, along with typifications and recipes for action, there is needed a set of social relationships that legitimize and reinforce it. It is important to have a sufficient number of intense interactions that reassure one of the reality of one’s beliefs and orientations. The mocking of deviance is also an important process that holds a reality in place. Social control

requires shunning those who think differently. It also requires conceptual and affective systems that enable one to dismiss other possible views of reality. Effort and energy need to be put into all of this. The teacher's sense that only the students who answer in just this kind of language are the bright ones is not some kind of simple observation of natural facts. It is a social construction of reality of a particular kind. What holds it in place is the biography of the teacher and the character of the society within which she works.

Phenomenological sociology has often been associated with what has come to be called "labelling theory". Several studies (cf., Rist, 2007) indicate that students' performances are closely associated with the ways in which students, teachers, parents, family and neighbours see or label them. We are actively constructing student success and failure. It is not an objective fact that exists externally to the efforts and typificatory schemas of teachers and educators. An extreme version of this is to say that teachers create failure. While that strong a position may lead us to deny student agency altogether and also over-estimating the power of teachers over students' lives, phenomenological sociology does get us to pay more attention to the dialectics of emotions and cognitive schemes in school life. These make a tremendous contribution to educational achievements and to the creation and the challenging of social inequality in educational institutions.

The sociology of everyday life made a dramatic impact on both the character of sociology as well as the way educational institutions were seen. It spoke in a new voice which wanted to move away from the older focus on social structure and institutions. The established sociology of education had a greater concern with structural inequalities than with the experience of inequality in everyday life and the ways of negotiating with it. Functionalists would write about the education system's need to maintain the structure of the economy or the family. The older Marxist in the sociology of education, too, was concerned with the reproduction of the social structure, though it looked upon this with a much more disapproving eye than the functionalists. The Weberian tradition was indeed interested in individual action within structural walls, but had a very limited way of imagining this. While in all these there had been an awareness of people's daily feelings and thoughts and practices, these were not clearly theorized or articulated. Symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical sociology, ethnomethodology and phenomenological sociology brought a new and vivid way of seeing how social inequality operated in education and also how it was being struggled against. The sense of being a watershed mark in the evolution of sociology was widely felt, so much so that this began to be called the "new" sociology of education (Bates, 1980, Saha, 1978).

## Theorizing the Construction of Social Inequality in Everyday Life of the School

This present section highlights some of the paradigms through which sociologists and anthropologists began to understand the construction of social inequality through schooling. Where the previous section dealt with everyday life per se, here the emphasis is on schooling and social reproduction. The work of Paul Willis, John Ogbu, Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu exemplifies interconnected ways of seeing how the subjectivity of school and college students gets constructed by educational institutions and their social structure. They offer valuable perspectives and conceptual tools to understand the social construction of school failure in line with broader patterns of social inequality. Instead of seeing students as puppets in the hands of the social system, these perspectives give ways of understanding their subjectivities and offer a rich way of seeing how those may get constructed.

A classic example of the study of everyday life to illustrate macro-sociological concerns is Paul Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour*, written after intense ethnographic fieldwork with working class boys in a school located in England. Willis depicts the counterculture which is created among children from working class groups as a response to their structural location in a society which makes it almost impossible for them to break into new opportunities. His portrayal could bridge the macro structural concerns and the individual/micro lives – it recognized the working-class children's sense of agency and no longer portrayed them as just being passive workers in an industrially oriented, unequal education machinery. Willis suggests that some working-class children ("lads" as they called themselves) developed their own mechanism for resistance to school authority and built a counter culture that enabled them to negotiate with it on a day to day basis. They poked fun at teachers, found ways of cutting class to furtively smoke cigarettes and looked forward eagerly to a life of assembling machinery in factories so that they could use their earnings to go out in the evening to drink in pubs. The important point of departure that Willis brings to us is that it was not just the capitalist market-oriented education machinery that discriminated against the lads, rather even the lads as a mode of resistance chose to remain rebellious rather than become middle-class conformists. They proudly presented themselves as 'uneducated' and rejecters of school education. They were in one sense voluntarily disqualifying themselves from the middle class race for the well-paid, mental /white-collar jobs and were choosing instead the position of the manual, low-paid workforce.

Willis enables us to see that the way in which Marxist reproduction theorists like Bowles and Gintis (ibid.) had portrayed the curriculum and the educational machinery as being responsible for reproducing inequality while being significant is inadequate. It is equally important for us to discover how the children in such schools develop their own subjectivities and far from being passive sufferers alone, develop a counterculture for resistance. So, from a grand systematic Marxist analysis, Willis takes us to the lives of students, their body gestures, language and jokes, their moments of laughter, and their resistance to the hegemonic ideology that seems to see them as nothing more than labour force best suited for menial jobs. He argues that it is important to see how these children accept their labouring class subjectivity and see themselves as the 'others' in the middle-class culture of



the school. Willis pulls out working class children from the definition of passive recipients of an order from above and instead acknowledges an agency, a possibility of resistance. He argues that this calls upon education activists to rethink ways of engaging with children and youth and learn new ways of involving them in struggles and movements that can overcome social oppression and inequality through education. We need to stop seeing the process of their social exclusion as an act which is imposed upon dumb, unthinking individuals and view it instead as one which weaves their subjectivity into actively taking part in the reproduction of social structure.

### *Oppressed Communities and Educational Achievement*

The work of John Ogbu moved the above concern with the subjectivities of students into a different direction. Where Willis was concerned with the reproduction of social class, Ogbu was more interested in understanding the inequalities of races and ethnic communities in schools (Ogbu 2003, Ogbu and Simon, 2004). Himself an immigrant from Nigeria into USA, Ogbu sought to understand why some immigrant minorities in that country did well in schooling while others didn't. His answers led him to the ways in which people thought about and categorized the culture of schools. Ogbu argued that social inequalities were closely implicated in how children looked at themselves and at the act of learning in schools. Communities which were oppressed and humiliated began to think of themselves and schools in a way which could lead to the rejection of school learning.

Ogbu differentiated between the voluntary and involuntary immigrants in terms of their response to schooling. The former included most of the Chinese and some Africans in the US, who came with aspirations for a better life and were willing to integrate within the school system for it. However, involuntary immigrants, like the Africans who were brought as slaves, found the social environment to be hostile and the school was seen as one more threat to their identity and culture. What he called the "system" thus played an important role in creating the "cultural ecology" within which individuals from particular communities sought to study and learn.

Ogbu said there were important "community forces" which had to be understood if we wanted to make sense of who was a school success and who was a school failure. The community forces led to the development of different cultural models of how to deal with schools. These could lead to embracing the culture of the schools or to rejecting them. Ogbu outlined several kinds of cultural models which communities could have evolved. For instance, they could have a cultural model of life trajectories which emphasized following the rules, accepting institutions and working hard. This fitted well with schools and led children to accept the norms and practices of the classroom. Children with such cultural models did well in school. On the other hand, there could be cultural models of life trajectories in which school did not figure prominently. Thus, some communities might have business or farming as the accepted and likely life path. Oppressed communities might believe that the dominant social groups were basically and unequivocally opposed to their presence in mainstream institutions. It was therefore considered to be futile to try and make it through schooling. Under such circumstances, the appropriate responses might be to not care for the rules and be open to breaking them and to be willing to work twice as hard for that. There might be a

celebration of great courage and bravery in seeking alternative pathways. Such cultural models did not encourage students to take schooling, classrooms or homework seriously. Ogbu emphasized that the existence of such cultural models could not be seen as just a pathological trait but was the result of histories of oppression by dominant cultures and institutions. The lived experience of being denied resources and respect had led to the growth of such cultural models.

The presence of role models which demonstrated the worth of schooling was another important factor in shaping the cultural models. For some communities the greatest aspiration could be to become a professor in an American university or to be an IIM graduate and CEO. For others, it could be to be a medal winning athlete and a swashbuckling smuggler. Trust – its presence or absence – was a key factor. Communities which found schools threatening and saw them as denying their identity and dignity took up a defensive posture vis-a-vis them. Teachers who saw themselves as superior to the community were seen as being contemptuous of parents and children. Children learned to stonewall teachers and not allow their knowledges in too close. Conversely, communities could also develop ways of negotiating with dominant cultures and maintain their own self-respect while acquiring the ways of the powerful. They could promote their own languages and knowledges and at the same time could have an instrumental orientation towards schools as a way of accessing power and positions. Dealing with schools in this way in one's mind made it possible to listen to teachers and accept their cues and directions. It could also be that while the teacher and the school was the bearer of a dominant culture, that could be seen as legitimately superior. Thus, missionary schools in India and other parts of the world which were able to reach out and establish their legitimacy were often trusted and had a profound impact upon the learning levels of students.

The work of John Ogbu has become a source of many insights for research into relations between communities and school achievement and failure. Schools are not neutral spaces. Instead, they are vessels of particular cultures, which could have relations of domination and could be threatening to the communities which sent children into them. John Ogbu helps us to see the cultural models and other ways through which community forces act upon schooling.

### *Classification and Framing of School Knowledges*

The work of Basil Bernstein (1996, 2003) parallels some of Ogbu's concerns, an important difference being that Bernstein was concerned with the inequalities between classes while Ogbu was looking mainly at the relations between ethnic groups. Bernstein drew upon a Durkheimian way of looking at social structures to examine how knowledges and pedagogies were transacted and reacted upon in the classroom. He argued that working class children came from particularistic cultures while middle-class children carried more universalistic cultures. These were connected to the ways in which their respective families articulated with the economic and social structure. Particularistic cultures used knowledges and languages which were specific in their references and were intimately tied to their contexts. Universalistic cultures used knowledges and languages which could range across different contexts and could abstract into an integrative and crosscutting form. These two kinds of cultures were connected with the class relations of industrial societies.

Bernstein was careful not to say that working class children were deficient or deprived. However, the school system was controlled by the middle classes and was oriented around knowledges and pedagogies which privileged universal cultures. Bernstein used the notion of restricted codes to refer to underlying structural principles of particularistic societies and cultures and the notion of elaborate codes for the underlying structural principles of universalistic ones. Amongst the reasons for school failure and the discarding of students from working class backgrounds was their dissonance with the elaborate codes and universalistic cultures of the school. It appeared as if the education system was neutral, but its hidden codes worked effectively to exclude the working classes from higher levels in it.

Power was an essential feature of these codes and of the everyday activities of the school. School curricula that sought to keep students under control and to discourage them from breaking out of their social roles emphasized a strong classification system of knowledges. Pedagogies could also frame the transactions of the classroom in strong ways, which penalized those who did not go along with their flow. The way knowledge was constructed in classrooms itself expressed the deeper structural relations of industrial societies. Schools for the elites had weaker classification systems and had flexible and elastic pedagogies. These encouraged ways of seeing things in new combinations and promoted the building of new attitudes to the world. All this was part of the process of creating elites with elaborate codes.

The struggle to create a more egalitarian society, according to Bernstein, had to rethink the way school curricula were classified and the way classroom pedagogies operated. This called for revising the division of elaborate and restricted codes between the working and the ruling classes. This was not a simple matter since just pushing students used to one code into classrooms privileging the other was a sure-shot way of creating school failure. Bernstein acknowledged that this would have to be a slow process of creatively rethinking school education and cited the work of Paulo Friere as an example of having elaborate codes in the classroom which were empowering for the lower classes as well.

The work of Basil Bernstein makes an important contribution to our framework for understanding the cultural struggles occurring in schools and classrooms. Where Ogbu dealt with the influence of ethnic domination, Bernstein brings out the ways in which class domination might operate in industrial societies. Both give ways of understanding the predicament of the child who freezes in the classroom and is declared a dud and a loser. Our conceptual framework for understanding this is further enriched by the work of Pierre Bourdieu whom we turn to next.

### *Durable Dispositions and Persistence Of Inequality*

What Ogbu calls the system has been conceptualized in a rich and powerful way by Pierre Bourdieu (1979, 1984, with Passeron, 1990). He argued that classes and status groups which first came to dominate a field begin to define what constitutes as capital in it – of the cultural, social and economic kind. Later entrants must struggle within those definitions and at times with the

definitions themselves in order to make space for themselves. A key concept which deals with everyday life is that of the “habitus” or the durable dispositions which actors carry. Habitus are acquired through the daily experiences that people have. Particular social locations lead to the formation of particular kinds of habituses. These then go on to guide the way people make choices and have preferences. It appears as if the choices are their personal, uniquely authentic acts, but actually at work behind them are the habituses of their social locations. The habitus was at the centre of Bourdieu’s analyses of culture, art and education. He argued that that these were fields where certain status groups had possession of the more valued capital. Those who held less of those forms of capital were in positions of disadvantage. The ability to acquire and apply capital was erroneously thought of as a quality that was purely individual. In reality, behind it stood histories and entire social structures. The habitus that led to the appreciation of the higher and more powerful kinds of cultures was not a personal quality, but one that came from social location.

Bourdieu did most of his work with France in mind and pointed out that while government run schools and universities there appeared to be providing equal access to all, still children from the upper middle classes were the ones who did best at them. The children of the most privileged classes were the ones who were present in the largest numbers in universities and courses that led to positions of the greatest power in that country. The hidden processes which led to this reproduction of social inequality were operating through the cultivation of habituses. The cultures of the privileged defined higher achievement in schools and other institutions. Those who had matching habituses had the preferences and tastes that led them to study in particular ways and to develop appropriate passions and desires. Those who did not have the “right” habitus were the ones who dropped out or performed poorly. The habitus was the mechanism through which social structure and history entered the daily meaning-making actions of people. Paying attention to this level of reality was therefore necessary if we wanted to understand how social inequality was created and maintained.

Studies with a more structural emphasis tell us quite convincingly that education systems around the world are usually tilted against the less powerful sections of society. Serious political, cultural and economic struggles are needed to balance that structural bias. The difficulty has been that while we can easily see the broader demographic patterns of social inequality in education, the exact ways in which that inequality operates was earlier quite poorly understood. What works of scholars like Bourdieu, Bernstein, Ogbu and Willis contribute is to help us to understand the processes involved in the social construction of success and failure in schooling. They draw our attention to the subjectivities and resistances of the oppressed and exploited and the way those work out in schools. Where Bourdieu and Bernstein tend to emphasize more on the construction and the consequences of subjectivities for the social structure, Willis and Ogbu give us insights on the ways in which students resist domination. Together they offer several different ways of theorizing and seeing these. Some of these have been adequately applied in the Indian context, but others not. We turn next to an analysis of some studies of everyday life in Indian education to see some important learnings here and to identify possible gaps which might be present.

## Indian Studies of Everyday Life of Schools

This section reviews the sociological and anthropological research which has been done in India on the everyday life of schools. The intention is to outline the various perspectives and approaches that have been made use of here, without claiming to do an exhaustive listing of and every study done in India. The perspectives deployed here will be identified along with those that no one seems to have made use of. The next section will move on to examine the very few studies which directly look at the social construction of school success and failure here.

### *Styles, Presentations and Negotiations*

A strong thread in Indian studies of the everyday life of schools has been to look at negotiations between individuals in particular contexts and the ensuing construction of the self and of styles of performance. This is inspired by Peter Woods (ibid.) and David Hargreaves (ibid.) who drew together two different sets of ideas, the symbolic interactionism of Mead and Blumer and the dramaturgical sociology of Goffman, respectively, to build an influential model of school ethnography. They were deeply interested in teacher styles and how students and teachers thought about and presented themselves. David Hargreaves, for instance, wrote about how teachers in a particular British school were somewhere between three contrasting styles: the lion-tamer, the entertainer and the romantic. Each of these styles meant different teaching practices and different relationships with students. These scholars also brought out that far from being an idyllic site for the delivery of wisdom to eager children, life in school for teachers was actually a continuous struggle. They sweated to attain two key goals - to maintain control over the classroom and at the same time get pupils to actually learn. All the time they were also trying to retain some autonomy and space for themselves. This meant dealing with the pulls and pressures of the administration and the parents, too. Each set of actors in the school had their own agendas and techniques of trying to define and control the situation. This was no pleasant world of consensus, but one of continuous negotiations and struggles.

Meenakshi Thapan's *Life at school* (1991) is a classic ethnography that deploys such ideas to analyse the organizational structure, rituals and interactions of Rishi Valley School in the early to mid-1980s. She vividly brings out the presentations of self that take place in organizational and teaching sites. Teachers deployed several kinds of styles in the classroom and their power ensured that children mostly strike a truce and accept them. At the same time there was a continuous negotiation from the students to try and maintain their own autonomy. This was far greater in the junior classes, and much less in the senior classes where the looming board examinations compelled students to give in and follow the teachers' cues and directions to a much greater extent. The ideology of Krishnamurti which celebrated individual freedom and agency was always in the background, sometimes supporting and sometimes hampering the functioning of the teachers. The various actors in the school used it as a gambit for a variety of disparate goals. Teacher identities and practices got formed at least partially through the way they related to these ideologies and the way they saw their roles vis-a-vis children and the institution. Thapan presents an insightful analysis of struggles for selfhood, control and autonomy in sites that range from the students' hostels to classrooms to the sports fields.

Many of the concerns of Thapan's seminal book are echoed and developed further in the ethnographic writings by younger scholars which she later brought together in an edited volume (Thapan, 2014). In it Anuradha Sharma (2014) for instance, examines the peer interactions of students in a private school in Delhi. She makes a sensitive portrayal of the negotiations and presentations of self which take place there, including the way in which class and gender (cf. Bhattacharjee (1999) for a careful study of gender socialization that does not make use of interactionist concepts) are processes that interweave through the smallest of actions and meanings.

In an independent work, Ridhima Garg (2018) similarly used the concepts and approaches of Woods and Hargreaves to study a small government school in Hoshangabad. She highlighted the centrality of fear and violence in the relations between teacher and students (cf., Iyer, 2013 for a more Foucauldian analysis). The styles which students developed as ways of dealing with the school were primarily about how to keep themselves safe. For instance, students could take up a style of being "believers" who completely agreed that whatever the teacher did was best for them and were continuously trying to please the teacher. Another kind of response was that of the "invisibles" who tried their best to efface themselves and disappear into the walls. And a third kind of response was the "masti karne wale" or the ones who loved fun and mischief, who enjoyed being seen as adversaries of the teacher. A troubling implication of the study was that avoidance of punishment became such a driving goal for the students that caring about what was being taught got buried deep below it. The teachers' desires to maintain control over the school and the means they adopted for it overcame and erased the goal of actually teaching the students something.

### *Phenomenology of Knowledge*

There is a rich body of work in India, which examines the construction of school knowledge. This is a distinct emphasis from the works mentioned above, which are concerned more with the interactions and styles of teachers and students, though often these are touched upon as well. In the more directly phenomenological tradition, there is a greater emphasis on how knowledge gets defined, transacted and constructed in the everyday life of schools.

A good example of this is Gaysu R. Arvind's (2008) comparison of a conventional government school with a community school run by the NGO Bodh in Rajasthan. She describes the way Maths is taught in a class and points out that the teacher is working with a sharply defined framework. Students are assumed to come as blank slates to the school and expected to learn the specific procedures and methods as being taught by the teacher. Arvind uses the ideas of Basil Bernstein to say that this is an explicit curriculum and pedagogy, with a hard and fixed classification of knowledge and as well as framing of the ways of teaching. She points out that most contemporary education theorists believe that this is not the best way to teach. Instead, children should be gradually drawn into communities of practice and do situated learning. Learning should be driven by engagements with worlds that are meaningful, rather than through the mechanical following of the teacher's directions. While this is mostly absent in the government school, Arvind sees it happening in the community school.

She describes a class where children read a short passage on the friendship between a crow and an eagle. The discussions in the class are not just restricted to the text and its message. Children feel free enough in the classroom to bring in several of their own experiences and observations about relationships and the local ecology. She sees here the implicit curricula and pedagogy which Bernstein had talked about. The weak classification and framing invites children to become part of the lesson. This leads them to experience reading as something part of their own lives and a source of interesting and evocative meanings.

Padma Sarangapani's *Constructing School Knowledge* (2003) is an excellent ethnography in this tradition. She did a study of a primary school near Delhi and enquired into the processes through which school knowledge was being construed there. Her research was guided by the paradigms spelt out by Berger and Luckmann (ibid.) and the desire to understand the epistemologies current in the local school culture. She inquired into the characteristics of the students as knowers and the ways in which they and the teachers categorized and interpreted what went as school knowledge. Particularly interested in the teaching of science, she showed that verbal testimony was the main source of legitimate knowledge. The use of experimentation and reasoning was a distant second, if at all present. For most students science was indeed about doing things, but few grasped the significance of experimentation.

Sarangapani used Bernstein's concepts to point out that there was a very sharp classification between school knowledge on the one hand and lived, home knowledge on the other. This led to what was being learned in school remaining there itself. School knowledge was seen mainly as knowledge "*de dicto*", which was propositional and only to be written about. The sharp classification kept it out of the domain of knowledge "*de re*", which was about daily life, that is to say knowledge which was used for action and doing things. Indira Jayaram (2010) finds similar patterns when using Bernstein's concepts to examine science teaching in greater depth in some schools of Bengaluru. She found strong classifications of knowledge in all the schools studied. The framing and pacing of pedagogy were relatively weak only in an international school.

An interesting strand in this tradition has been to look at the construction not just of propositional and procedural knowledge, but of an embodied, affective knowledge. Veronique Benei (2008), for instance, has used the phenomenology of the body and emotions to explore how a Maharashtrian version of Hindu nationalism and Muslim identity gets constructed in schools (cf. Manjrekar 2013 for a sensitive study of the construction of gendered beliefs regarding nationalism, without a primary emphasis on the body). She argued that nationalism was getting taught through the rituals and physical activities of the school along with its discourses, drawing out in particular the way the body was the site for the social construction of an embodied knowledge. Even the object for whom devotion was being inculcated, Mother India, was portrayed as a gendered body. Shivaji was the epitome of masculinity, while his loving, guiding mother whose political vision Shivaji strove to fulfil was the greatest symbol of femininity. Peggy Froerer (2007) in a study of a Saraswati Shishu Mandir, does a systematic comparison of children in different grades to bring out how the

control of the body is part of a process of social control. Here there was a school subject called *Sadachar* – good behaviour – which spelled out how the actions of the body, even its posture and its punishments, created what was considered to be a good person and a good Indian. To be good one had to stand straight and not slouch. Beatings were a necessary part of this education. They were most common at the youngest ages, but declined in frequency as children grew older. An embodied moral project was internalized where violence, for instance, was considered necessary for the teaching of virtuous behaviour. Unlike Benei, Froerer emphasizes that the moral project was not mirrored in a simple way by the children. The official narratives of nationalism in the school and its textbooks did not get picked up directly by the children. Instead, the punishments and the body's training were seen as being intended for the goal of academic success. Being a good Indian was the same as getting a good job and going to work abroad. For the children serving the nation remained a secondary goal.

The concern with the construction of school knowledge has also led to insightful work on school success and failure, which we shall look at in the next section. It makes up one of the two main streams of research into the everyday life in Indian schools, the second, of course, being that inspired by symbolic interactionism and dramaturgical sociology. Strangely, I have not been able to find any study which uses ethnomethodology for its frame of analysis. True, these are all interrelated and all eventually descend from the common progenitors of pragmatism and European phenomenology. Yet, the rigour and detailed, structured analysis characteristic of the ethnomethodological approach does not seem to have found takers here.

Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu have the greatest influence on these studies of the everyday life of the school. The work of Paul Willis can also be seen to have an impact, particularly on the research of Thapan and Sharma. However, John Ogbu's formulations of community forces and their models of how to look at schooling have not been taken up. These offer a powerful way of understanding students and teacher interactions in schools. The application and development of Ogbu's work in the Indian context is an area of great but untapped potential.

### **The Social Construction of School Failure and Success in India**

While several of the studies of everyday life in schools have implications for the construction of school failure, the writings which directly focus on the construction of educational inequality are relatively few. The best known of these is perhaps Krishna Kumar's chapter entitled "Learning to be Backward" in his book *Social Character of Learning* (1989). The main thrust of the chapter is to bring out the processes through which the power of the curriculum, and its main instrument the textbook, is applied to assert that the Adivasis of India are "backward". Krishna Kumar analyses for that the classroom transactions of a grade eleven class which he observed in a Central School. The textbook speaks in a matter of fact way about the tribals teaching Tantrism, which is implied to be a backward religious cult, to Brahminical Hinduism. There is little in the text which can indicate the contested and constructed character of such claims, Kumar argues. Such writing styles deny any

legitimacy to those who would question what is being said. Meanwhile the classroom's interactions are such that the teacher has enormous power over students. When an Adivasi child in the class is asked about the tribals having been responsible for teaching this backwardness, he dares not question or quibble. The wider culture of being a child means that one does not question one's elders. To disagree is to invite trouble and retribution from the imposing figure of the teacher. The student remains quiet and does not answer the question. But Krishna Kumar points out, whether he had answered the question "correctly" or kept quiet, the interactional setting ensured that he had still become complicit in this labelling of Adivasis as backward.

Such work stands squarely in the phenomenology of school knowledge tradition, resonating with the analyses of scholars like Bernstein (ibid.) and M.F.D. Young (1971). It is concerned with the curriculum and its transaction in the school classroom, paying attention to the processes which constitute social exclusion and learning to be a school failure.

A somewhat different direction in the construction of social inequality through the transaction of school knowledge is explored by K. N. Sunandan (2014). His interest lies more towards the phenomenology of the emotions and the body. Sunandan takes as his point of departure the discussion between Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2012) on the importance of senses beyond the visual and auditory in learning. An underlying idea running through their book had been that Brahminism had suppressed the knowledges of the "lower" castes and rendered only their own knowledges as valid in education. This was carried forward under colonial rule and after independence to perpetuate the domination of the "upper" castes.

Sunandan drew upon recent works on the anthropology of the body, experience and emotion to study three sites – Dalit households, Brahmin households and the school. He paid special attention to how experience was guided and taught there and how language was interwoven with experience. The Dalits, he studied were agricultural workers who made use of several senses. Their perceptions actually went beyond the conventional categorization of the five senses alone. These senses were integrated together in their experiences and did not operate in an isolated manner. In contrast, children in Brahmin households were encouraged to focus mainly on listening and seeing (in the form of reading and writing). Brahmin children were explicitly instructed to sit and observe. They were also encouraged to separate the domain of reading and writing from the lived experiences of their house. All these were epistemological characteristics that were then privileged in the school too. Dalit children complained that the school was bereft of any feelings and emotions. They found it too flat and boring. The separation of threads within the school had negative consequences for them. Their own lives may have been closely intertwined with living things, but the biology class left them completely cold. Boredom and disinterest led them to drop out or to not do as well as other students who were more accustomed to just sitting and listening. Schools were centred on reading and writing alone, disparaging and devaluing the other senses.

While the two studies mentioned above are more concerned with the way knowledge is construed and its impact on educational inequality, S. Srinivasa Rao (2013) makes use of theoretical perspectives which look at interactional orders. He uses Erving Goffman's concept of stigma to discuss the experience of SC/ST students in IITs. While he does not actually conduct observations of classrooms, he argues that institutional processes stigmatize certain students. This leads them to withdraw within themselves and get disengaged from learning. The institutionalized stigmatization is what pushes students into not doing well.

A more elaborate use of the concepts and issues typical of studies of the interactional order to examine the construction of educational inequality is done by Lakshmi Bhatia (2010). She studied two government schools in Manipur and paid careful attention to what was happening in their classrooms and corridors. Drawing extensively from the frameworks of Peter Woods (ibid.), David Hargeaves (ibid.) and Meenakshi Thapan (ibid.) she said that teachers held strong control over the classrooms. They showed an "on stage" behaviour which kept the students tightly restrained in their responses. The relations between students and teachers was markedly hierarchical and the students' body movement and talk were vigorously regulated. Apart from trying to teach a good deal of energy was spent just on maintaining control over the classroom. Bhatia noted that just as the resistance theorists (Apple 1999, 2000, Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985) had said, the result of this classroom tableau was that students moved towards becoming detached from the proceedings and most of them just paid a ritual and token attention to what was being taught.

One of the two studied government schools was in a rural area and that had the greatest problems in getting student involvement. The teachers saw themselves in the mode of cultural missionaries, whose job was to civilize the wild and undisciplined children. They were openly contemptuous of their wards. Students' resistance to such an atmosphere took the form of staring blankly out of the window, talking amongst themselves and occasionally making fun of the teachers. Bhatia drew upon Basil Bernstein and Pierre Bourdieu to argue that the pedagogy itself was responsible for alienating the students. The sharp classifications of pedagogy and school knowledge kept the students from being able to engage with it. Their habituses were marginalized and disparaged. It was the pedagogy which led to boredom and indifference, eventually leading to school failure and the reproduction of social inequality.

A sweeping integration of different theoretical perspectives is done by Mohammad Talib (1992, 2010). He worked for several years with a group of stone quarry workers in Delhi. He followed their children in a government school and found that out of a cohort of 37 in grade three only 9 remained by grade five. On trying to understand why they were dropping out; a common refrain was that they believed they were not good enough to be in school. Drawing from Paul Willis' work, his central question became: why did students from poorer families conclude that they were not good enough for school?

Talib, like Peter Woods, tried to understand the ways in which students were relating to teachers in the classroom. He found that they were continually bored and alienated there. Large amounts of time were spent gazing outside the window or daydreaming, withdrawing into their own world. Several such “removal activities” in the words of Goffman were being practiced. There were also several kinds of “retreatism”. Students would just not pay attention, or covertly play with marbles in the class. There were sometimes even more explicit expressions of disgust and resistance to the teachers, who were all from upper castes and the middle. The teachers themselves were openly contemptuous of the children. There was little understanding of the background from which the children came. They would say that the curriculum was beyond the capacity of the children. Violence was the main method of interaction in the class and of keeping the children under control.

Along with the analysis of interactions, Talib also looks at the construction of knowledge. In his analysis of the curriculum, he pointed out that it lionized the life of the mind and disparaged the manual labour. All lessons and stories had the literate or the ruling classes at their centre. While there were some instances of people struggling hard against overwhelming odds and triumphing, the working classes were not respected or lauded anywhere. In resonance with M.F.D. Young Talib, too, argued that such a schooling was serving to construct a culture that kept the marginalized in their place.

## Conclusions

This concluding section will take up two questions: (a) which are the theoretical perspectives of sociology, i.e. the ways in which we see and grasp, that have been so far applied to questions of everyday life and school failure in India and which are the perspectives that have potential but are yet to be deployed here? (b) What are the substantive issues that the literature has raised and what are the questions that are still open here? Both these questions have implications for how we try to overcome the social construction of school failure in this region.

### *Theoretical Toolkits*

One of the ways in which literature reviews are useful is that they provide a conceptual toolkit for future work. They give us a pool of concepts – ways of looking at the world – from which we can then pick and choose what works best for us with respect to the challenges we are trying to address. This present review, with all its limitations, suggests a rich way of looking at how school success and failure get sociologically created. While this is certainly not a complete model, since we must also add perspectives coming from philosophy, child development, curriculum studies and so on, it is still a valuable set of concepts and perspectives.

To begin with, it should be noted that research in this area has not developed any uniquely Indian theoretical perspective. It has been inspired mainly by theoretical traditions developed in west Europe and North America. However, in spite of the change in context, these have connected well with the issues and concerns of this region. Meenakshi Thapan’s work, for instance, while

using concepts and perspectives from Western scholars has been inspired by the efforts of the Krishnamurti Foundation schools as well. Similarly, K. N. Sunandan’s work is responding to debates over caste and epistemology. Unfortunately, Indian or other non-Western philosophies of the self and knowledge do not seem to have informed any of the extant conceptual frameworks for the study of everyday life. This is hardly surprising since the task of building a decolonized social science has barely taken off in any part of the world. Meanwhile, the ways in which the different scholars discussed here have examined everyday life in schools are still instructive and useful.

While ethnomethodology seems to have been largely ignored by scholars working on India, the other three main theoretical perspectives on the study of everyday life are well represented here. Symbolic interactionism and dramaturgical sociology have led to concerns with teacher styles and students’ ways of responding and negotiating. Phenomenological sociology has examined how school knowledge is being formulated and how it gets transacted. This has had both a cognitive and conceptual as well as an affective and embodied version.

Out of the ways of examining the construction of educational inequality in everyday life, the work of Basil Bernstein is what seems to have had the greatest impact on Indian research. There are several works which have found his distinction between elaborate and restricted classifications and framings useful. The notion of the resistance of working-class children has also found traction here. Interestingly, while references to Bourdieu are common in writings on Indian education, his conceptual framework has not actually been translated into an empirical investigation. For instance, we still don’t have an empirically rooted analysis of what exactly is the habitus that enables or disables academic success in a particular field and how that has been historically constituted through the shaping of power and capital in that field.

The work of John Ogbu does not seem to have led to any empirical work here either. This has considerable promise by virtue of its formulations of community forces and the different forms they may take up and the consequences they may have on students and families deal with schools. In contemporary South Asia, where communities of several kinds are so important this is a strange gap and research in this direction can be expected to provide important insights.

### *Substantive Issues*

The sparse nature of empirical research works on the social construction of school success and failure in everyday life means we must be cautious in generalizing from the extant studies. However, they do point us in important directions, which need to be further explored and mapped out. Equally importantly, they exemplify possible ways of conducting such research in India. If understanding this domain of reality is valuable for the building of a better education system, these studies become pointers and guides for future work.

A key issue which comes out several writings here is the problem of the curriculum and the way in which knowledge is being constructed in the classroom. Talib, Sunandan and Kumar, amongst

others, warn us that the curriculum may be reproducing the wider social relations of exploitation and oppression. This may lead to forming and sealing identities of subalternity. Privileging the culture of the more powerful and disparagement of the culture of the oppressed becomes a powerful force leading to the construction of school failure. The construction of school knowledge includes the notion that one is condemned to be a loser and never be as good as the others. This gains an air of naturalness and inevitability. There is little space to see or question the structures of power which shape one's identity. The institutional stigmatization which Rao delineates ensures that students get further locked into their corners and disables them from engaging and creating new relationships with the curriculum and their peers and teachers.

The effect of teachers' orientations and styles on the creation of educational inequality is also touched upon by Talib and Bhatia. Their beliefs of their cultural and social superiority to the students lead to certain ways of relating to them. Empowering and autonomy-building relationships rarely get created.

A linked, but distinct issue which Talib and Bhatia bring out is that of boredom and meaninglessness which students experience in the classroom. Pedagogies which emphasize violence and compulsion fail to inject life and vitality into what they want to teach. The meaningfulness of school life revolves mainly around how to survive it rather than around how to celebrate learning and knowledge. This is a problem which gets redoubled for students who don't come from the dominant culture of the school. They fall back to forms of resistance in the classroom and further distance themselves from that space. This again affects their learning and their school achievements.

### *Future Studies*

Research on the everyday creation of educational success and failure is only at a nascent stage in this country. The present review shows that while significant insights are available, our knowledge is still quite fragmentary. All we have is a study here and a study there. An important agenda for the future should be the building of a systematized picture of what is leading to failure, and even more importantly, what it is that can lead to students staying on and learning well in school. A few suggestions can be made here:

1. Non-European theories of the self and of social interaction need to be explored. These may have insights which the ontologies and epistemologies coming out of the west European and north American Enlightenment, valuable though they are, may have missed. This is not to say that we simply accept whatever we come across from non-European regions. Even within Indian philosophies of the self there is a vast diversity and disagreement. We will need ways of choosing between alternative perspectives. My submission is that we will continue to benefit from the methods that the Enlightenment had highlighted and which several Indian philosophical traditions, too, accept: we should privilege *pratyaksha* (empirical evidence) and *anumana* (inferential evidence) as ways of selecting, eliminating and integrating conceptual

systems. When these methods conflict with traditions, verbal testimonies, intuitions, etc. the results coming from empirical and inferential processes should be given priority. We need to actively look for and test ideas from sources beyond dominant academic cultures.

2. The possibilities and rigours of theoretical approaches which have not been tapped should be explored. The paradigms of ethnomethodology and of the works of Pierre Bourdieu and John Ogbu immediately recommend themselves.
3. In the theoretical traditions which have been applied in this region, there are still many nuances and concepts which have not been made use of. For instance, the way in which the self is built and how inner conversations occur (cf. Archer 2007, Reay 2004) and how that may lead to lower levels of school achievement has not been adequately explored. Another example is the need to understand the place of the autonomy of the self (individualism) and also the fear of it among several communities in South Asia. We need to understand how this influences agency and choice in schools.
4. The ways in which particular forms of Indian social inequality come out in the school and influence educational achievement has to be mapped. For instance, the way in which the class structure influences habituses, construction of the self, negotiations, etc. is still very poorly understood. How do these work in the educated wage labour and how do they work amongst the urban manual workers? Amongst urban skilled labour? In rural areas? Similarly, there is a very poor to non-existent mapping of how patriarchy, the caste system, regional inequalities and membership of a religious community leads to the phenomenology and the symbolic interactionism of school life. The variations in different kinds of schools also need to be understood. For instance, how would being a Muslim influence the everyday life of learning in rural government schools, in Central schools, in low-fee private schools, in elite public schools? The grid of categories that intersect each other is vast, and we have only anecdotal evidences for most of those situations. Building a comprehensive picture will be a lot of help.
5. Even more importantly, how have certain exploited, oppressed, humiliated and marginalized groups struggled to do better through education? This would mean exploring situations where the curricula, institutions, pedagogies have been sought to be redefined. It also means examining the "community forces" as Ogbu puts it, which come together for this purpose. Several of these struggles may be in the direction of reworking the goals of society and its education system altogether. There are many instances of such struggles, one of which Arvind's paper (ibid.) gives us a peep into. How does their everyday life work? What are the lessons for us all there? What forms do students' constructions of the self take which enable them to deal with oppressive situations? What forms do teachers and administrators constructions of the self and work styles take which enable resistance and the creation of better institutions? How do they constitute knowledges, of the cognitive, affective and techno-motor kinds, respectively? What are the accounts giving and methodic practices of teaching and learning there? The building of better curricula and pedagogies would benefit enormously from finding answers to such questions.

Traditional Sociology is content with explaining and understanding. Education, however, calls for interventions and for research that helps in designing better curricula, materials, pedagogies and institutions. Several kinds of experiments on how to have better teaching and learning and better institutional processes would need to be conducted and evaluated. The sociological perspective of everyday life would suggest research that develops solutions on at least some these areas: designing curricula which connect with the knowledges, sense of the self and interactional modes of particular communities, especially designing curricula which connects with the cultures of the less powerful. This would need to distinguish between curricular content which seeks to overcome deprivation and curricular content that seeks to overcome discrimination. A balance between both needs to be struck.

Social life is deeply fractured, and everyday life is a site where there are continuous struggles between different strata. An everyday life that empowers the disadvantaged in schools needs to be sought. Teacher styles and presentations of the self need to be examined and reworked so that they better engage with the disadvantaged. Pedagogies, assessments and administrative processes which do not label and stigmatize and instead engage with the accounts giving and presentations of the self of marginalized cultures need to be evolved. Educational effort needs to actually go beyond the school as an institutional site, too. If community orientations have to be harnessed and at times to be transformed, then educationists will need to find ways and sites for mobilizing communities as well.

Many more questions and themes for research could be added. Only the surface has been scratched in our understanding of the everyday life of schooling and its dialectics with the structural processes of social inequality. But it is clear that this kind of inquiry has vast potential in enabling the creation of a less exploitative and oppressive world.

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