
UNIT 8 LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: MEANING AND SCOPE

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8.1 INTRODUCTION

In block 1, we discussed the concepts and processes of learning that included the meaning of learning from different theoretical perspectives, learning as it occurs in various contexts, different types of learning, the processes of cognitive, psychosocial and value development, enculturation and acculturation, learning issues and concerns, different trends in learning, and systems of learning. Block 2 included a discussion of the learner characteristics and the learner from various perspectives. Block 1 and 2 thus set the background for unit 8. In this unit we are going to discuss the learning environment. To begin with, we examine the meaning of learning environment from different theoretical perspectives. We then proceed to discuss the formal and informal learning environments, the various constituents of learning environments, and its socio-cultural, psychological and physical aspects.

8.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the meaning of learning environment from different theoretical perspectives;
- identify the different components that constitute the learning environment in schools;
- discuss the features of learning environment in a school;
- understand the psychosocial dynamics operative in a learning environment;
- understand the influence of the psychosocial environment on the performance of individual learner;

- create appropriate psychosocial environment for individual learners;
- describe and discuss the features of different informal learning environments; and
- discuss the influence of informal environments on academic performance.

8.3 LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Environment may be described as a composite of natural conditions, circumstances and influences, and sociocultural contexts in which an organism is situated. Sociocultural environment is a creation of human beings. Natural environment, though not a creation of human beings, is often influenced by human behaviour, for example, industrialization leading to global warming. Both types of environment (natural and created) influence human beings. Interactions between human beings and environment operate in a dynamic fashion and throughout life. Environment is more of an external force with which humans interact and get influenced in the course of time. In this section, we will discuss environment in the context of learning.

Different learning theorists have taken different positions on how we learn. For the behaviourists, learning is an observable and measurable change in the behaviour of an organism. The behaviourists paid little attention to the inner processes of the organism. They believed that environment could be manipulated to bring about desired behavioural modification. Association learning is the mainstay of behaviourism. The environment is conditioned to achieve the predecided learning outcomes, which are observable and measurable. Skinner, the operant learning theorist suggested the use of reinforcements/punishments to bring about desired changes in behaviour. How the environment affects the internal thought processes of the organism has not been the concern for the behaviourists as those processes are not observable immediately. For the behaviourists, all learners should be able to achieve the same learning outcomes in a particular environment. In other words, the emphasis is on structuring the environment to achieve the predecided goals as environment alone controls behaviour.

Different from behaviourism, the mediation theory suggests that many of our learned behaviours take place through internal mediators, such as words, concepts, images etc that are non-observable. For example, a particular concept learning becomes easier when an appropriate word (mediator) is used to connect the stimulus and response. If behaviourism assumed the learner to be a passive organism whose behaviour could be modified by exposing to appropriate stimuli, the information-processing model theorists brought the innate nature of the learner to the centre stage in the process of learning. They saw learners active and capable of interpreting and manipulating the environmental stimuli. Here, learning is considered as a consequence of interactions between the learner and the environment. In this view, how the environmental stimulus is presented is not of as much consequence as the emphasis is on how the learner processes the information. Gestaltists take the position that the learner perception is subjective depending on the previous experience and the present circumstances of the learner. Similar to the Gestaltists' position of insightful learning, Jerome Bruner proposed discovery learning. He stated that we perceive the environment selectively and subjectively via insight. The meaningful reception learning theorists are of the view that we do not discover organized information but that we receive organized information. The meaningful reception learning theorists like Ausubel believe that the organization of stimuli is important for efficient learning. The emphasis is on creating conducive environment for efficient learning rather than leaving it to the learner alone to discover.

Bandura's social learning theory is inclusive of the behaviourist and cognitivist theories of learning. Bandura takes the position that reinforcement or spontaneous behaviour

is not necessary for learning to occur. Social learning theory proposes that new behaviour can be learned through observation and imitation. According to Bandura, learning is the result of interactions among personal characteristics, behaviour and environmental factors. Both social and physical environments influence learning. Children learn new behaviour by observing others. For example a child learns to pick up a bat and strike a ball after observing cricket matches being played in the neighbourhood. This behaviour is learned as a result of imitating and modeling the players. If a child grows up in a family where parents are aggressive, the child may learn to model aggressive behaviour. When a child observes that a particular adult behaviour is positively reinforced, the child may learn to model the behaviour. Similarly, if a particular adult behaviour is punished, the child is not likely to model that behaviour. Observational learning results in interaction of the person with the environment.

Social constructivists emphasize the role of culture and social interactions in learning. Vygotsky believed that social and cultural variables influence a child's learning. Children master culturally important tasks through social interactions. His theory recognizes that learners experience the environment (stimulus) differently, and thus the meaning making processes also vary. For Vygotsky, sociocultural environment plays a significant role in the process of learning as the learner uses cultural tools (like language) to mediate the meaning making process. Social constructivism does not advocate structured/controlled environment like behaviourism. Therefore, similar environments will not necessarily lead to similar learning outcomes.

8.4 FORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

For most people, the word learning has a strong association with the word school. For those who have been to school this mental imagery is natural. But also for others, who have not been to school, there is mental association between learning and school. We often hear such people attributing their inability to read and write to not being schooled, although we know that learning does not take place only in schools. In this section we are going to discuss school as a formal environment of learning. We call it a formal environment as school is a formal organization of learning. Children spend a considerable time (about 14 years) of their young life in school. Therefore it is important to understand the environment in which they learn.

As you know there are many stakeholders in a school system such as children, parents, teachers, community and school administration. In our discussion the focus will be on children placed in the formal (school) environment of learning. You know that teachers and students are two major players in a school system. The functioning of school as a learning organization is characterized by the continuous interactions between students and teachers. There are many contexts in a school system that influence student learning. We will now discuss the constituents of learning environment that operate in a school system.

8.4.1 School as a Miniature Society

As mentioned earlier there are different stakeholders and players in a school system. Each one has a different stake and represents separate groups in a society. Just as in a society, the clientele groups in a school system belong to different castes, class, religion and linguistic groups. Many of the members in a school system may belong to the community where the school is located. But some members may not belong to the immediate environment of the school. Most teachers and some students fall in this category. It can be said that school is representative of a society, which is made of heterogeneous group of people. This entails that, in schools children are placed in a different kind of environment than the one they belong to. They become members of a new society where the operating rules, norms and interpersonal styles are different from the local environment. For the student, school environment means a constant interplay between earlier/ongoing experiences in their locality and the new experiences

at the school. After entering school, in a way children hold dual societal membership, a member of the school community and a member of the local community. It is impossible to give up any of the two memberships. This requires children to make emotional and behavioural adjustments to be acceptable members of both societies. Are such transitions easy for the children to handle? How do such changes define the learning environment for individual student? Do all children perceive and experience the learning environment provided in the school similarly?

The Cultural Capital

Bourdieu(1973) was the first to use the term 'cultural capital' to explain the differences in educational outcomes in France during the 1960s. Cultural capital is a deeply internalized system of values, knowledge, attitudes that parents provide to children. This determines their attitudes and achievement in schools. Bourdieu studied the relationship between working-class culture and educational attainment. He stated that parents transmit to children cultural capital along with material conditions. School reproduces the dominant culture in which it exists. Working-class children in schools with middle class '**cultural capital**' are expected to meet achievement standards that are favorable to middle class children. Teachers themselves are products of the ruling class culture and perpetuate it in schools. Therefore, the accepted and legitimate culture in school is the ruling class culture that defines and determines what constitutes '**knowledge**' and '**intelligence**' and set the criteria of achievement. Bourdieu's study showed that schools do have dominant culture and children possessing the cultural capital of the dominant group are considered 'intelligent'.

Schools follow a prescribed/predecided curriculum, therefore, transmit the '**official knowledge**'. When children enter school, they already possess local knowledge. Children coming from different backgrounds bring to school different local knowledge. If the school curriculum ratifies the local knowledge of the child, he/she is at an advantageous position. If not, the official curriculum creates cognitive conflict for the child.

The Language Tool

Language is one of the cultural tools people use to express ideas and for socialization. Upon entering school, children are expected to socialize with people from varying cultural backgrounds. Just as there is an official curriculum, the school has an official language through which the curriculum is transacted. This means that if the child's everyday language/dialect is different from the official language of the school, then, the child will require a different language for socializing and learning. Bernstein has explored the relationship between social class and communication. He argued that the working-class children are at a disadvantage than middle-class children because:

the school is necessarily concerned with the transmission and development of universalistic orders of meaning... educational transmissions... are based on performance rules which the middle class child embryonically possesses. Class regulates the elaborated codes of education and the family (Bernstein, 1979).

Bernstein's theory seems to suggest that:

- working-class language is inappropriate in schools.
- the language of learning is different from everyday language.

Gender Differences

Before entering school, children have a socially constructed idea of gender differences of equality and inequality. The school has its own social construction of gender differences. Depending on their sociocultural background, teachers bring to school

their ideas of gender stereotypes. The child's idea of gender stereotypes may or may not match with that of the school, teachers and the peer group. The school practices may reinforce the child's idea of stereotypes or the child may be required to adjust or sort out between differing views on gender equations.

Although school is a formal environment of learning, it has all the characteristics of a society. Most of these societal characteristics are observable in manifested behaviours as these constitute the learning environment. In the following section we will discuss teacher behaviour as another constituent of the formal learning environment.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) Identify those characteristics that make your school a miniature society
(Hints: characteristics of the pupils and teachers, languages spoken, social class, religion etc).

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8.4.2 Teacher Behaviour

Children spend considerable time interacting with teachers. This is because the main purpose of school is to transact the curriculum and teachers are instrumental in curriculum transaction. The physical, social and psychological environment of the classroom is determined by the teacher. Depending on the teacher's attitude towards the teaching-learning processes, the classroom environment is created. A physical environment for learning is created by organizing teaching-learning materials and teaching-learning activities. While the physical environment in the classroom is observable, the social and psychological environment are manifested through the teacher's behaviour. Teachers tend to exhibit usually one of the following styles in managing their classrooms: **authoritarian**, **permissive** or **authoritative**. Authoritarian teachers set rules for classroom behaviour and not following rules invites punishment. Permissive teachers do not exercise control over student behaviour. Authoritative teachers establish rules for classroom behaviour in consultation with the students. They encourage students to exercise self-control and promote self-governance. A teacher who follows authoritarian style wants students to comply with rules. Such a teacher does not promote or appreciate independent thinking in students. In a study (Wentzel, 2002), middle school students describing their teacher in terms that reflect the authoritative style (teachers who set clear rules and explain the penalty for breaking them, trust students to carry out certain tasks independently, treat all students fairly, do not criticize students for not having the right answer, and have high expectations for academic achievement and behaviour) scored higher on measures of motivation, prosocial behaviour, and achievement than students who described their teacher in more authoritarian terms.

Self-fulfilling Prophecy

Teachers differ in their behaviour with different types of students. Teacher expectations influence the performance of the students. Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) in a study demonstrated the importance of teacher's attitudes, feelings and expectations in student learning. In their experiment, Rosenthal and Jacobson administered a non-verbal intelligence test to all children in an elementary school in the beginning of the year. The school teachers were, then, given names of some students who were expected to do well, pretentiously on the basis of the test score, while in fact these students were selected randomly. At the end of the school year, all children were re-examined and the students originally identified demonstrated significant intellectual growth than the other students. The study also revealed that children, who were not identified as doing well but showed intellectual gains during the school term, were considered by the teachers as less well-adjusted, less interesting or less affectionate. It demonstrated that the teachers held negative perceptions of children who made it on their own. The following implications can be derived thus from the Rosenthal experiment.

- Children tend to show intellectual gain when teachers expect them to do well.
- Children tend to do less well than others if teachers do not expect them to do well.
- Children who make intellectual gains contrary to the teacher expectation are negatively perceived by the teacher.

Rosenthal quoted Eliza Doolittle from George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion* to further explain the effect of teacher expectations on student behaviour.

You see, really and truly... the difference between a lady and a flower girl is not how she behaves, but how she's treated. I shall always be a flower girl to Professor Higgins, because he... treats me as a flower girl, ... but I know I can be a lady to you, because you always treat me as a lady, and always will.

Brophy and Good (1974) stated that research "over several years has established unequivocally that teacher's expectations can and do function as self-fulfilling prophecies" (p. 32).

Student Characteristics and Teacher Behaviour

In our earlier discussion, we have learnt that school is constituted by heterogeneous groups of people belonging to different religions, caste, class and speaking different languages/ dialects. The teacher and students may not belong to the same sociocultural and economic background. Both teachers and children bring their respective cultural capital to the school environment. Teachers tend to be more acceptable of children who conform to their class values. Becker (1969) found that teachers tend to think of students belonging to lower social class than theirs as morally unacceptable (the teachers felt that these students don't wash, don't brush teeth, use foul language, don't value education etc). Becker examined teachers in a school system and found that they had another set of attitudes towards children belonging to upper middle class group than those coming from lower middle class. The teachers felt the upper middle class children were bright, clever, and quick, but unruly, having no manners, finding fault with teachers and difficult to teach. The teachers were also apprehensive of the parents of these children complaining about their behaviour to the higher authority. It is not difficult to understand that student characteristics influence teacher behaviour. Teacher expectations of students vary according to teacher's perceptions of different students. Good (1983) found that teachers had lower expectations from children belonging to the social class lower than their own and did less effective teaching for them.

A school environment characterizes children belonging to different strata in the society. We have discussed this point in the section school as a miniature society. Here our focus is on peer group behaviour as a component of the total learning environment in the school. Initially children form groups based on shared values and identities which may be caste, class, language or religion. Later, subgroups may be formed based on other characteristics like demonstrated ability in any area. The group having the majority of the students will emerge as the dominant group. Individual student may perceive the school and classroom environment as friendly or hostile depending on his/her ability to conform to the norms of the dominant group and being accepted by the group. Some children engage in aggressive and bullying tactics against other children in the school. If individual students do not have adequate coping mechanisms, their psychosocial environment of learning is disturbed. Each learner perceives the prevalent school situations differently, thereby, experiencing the learning environment differently.

8.4.4 Learner Preferred Environment

There are certain factors that decide the learner's preference for a particular kind of learning environment. Different learners demonstrate different cognitive learning styles. In unit-7, we have discussed different cognitive styles to understand the characteristics of a learner. In this section, we discuss learner preferred cognitive styles as a component of the learning environment in school. Learning styles mean the learner's preferences for dealing with intellectual tasks. Researchers have identified various learning styles. Learner preferred learning environment is based on individual student's learning style. A learning environment that matches with the learner style facilitates learning. Let us briefly examine various learning styles.

Reflectivity and Impulsivity

When a question is posed, some students take a long time to respond while others are quick in response. The speed with which the respondents make a response to the task and the number of errors they make were termed as **conceptual tempo** by Kagan et al.(1964). Those students who respond quickly and make a fair number of mistakes are said to have a fast conceptual tempo. They are said to possess impulsive style of learning. Learners who are slow in response and tend to make fewer mistakes are called reflective. In problem-solving situations, the impulsive learner collects less data, is less systematic and does not look for alternative solutions. Reflective learner spends more time collecting information and analyzing the data before offering a response (Morgan, 1997).

Field Dependence and Field Independence

Students who employ field dependence style perceive globally. They prefer to work in prevailing structure or context, require externally defined goals and reinforcements and are more aware of their surroundings. Field independent learners perceive analytically. They see objects separately from the surrounding field, prefer to work in self-structured situation and have self-defined goals.

Sensory Modality Preferences

There are students who have sensory preferences for learning. **Visual learners** prefer to be in learning environments where they can see words and images. **Auditory learners** prefer learning situations where they can listen and talk to others and hear themselves. **Motor/tactile/haptic learners** prefer to learn through motor activity. They may be kinesthetic or mechanical.

Does learner preferred environment lead to effective learning? Researchers and teachers differ in their opinion. When learner styles match with learning environment,

sometimes it may lead to effective learning. However, sometimes learner preference does not lead to effective learning, indicating that students may actually benefit from a learning environment that does not match with their learning styles.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) Identify the different learning styles employed by your students. How did you differentiate between learner styles? Illustrate.

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- 2) Describe the features of the psychosocial environment created by any of your teachers when you were a school student.

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8.4.5 Physical Environment

So far, we have focussed on the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of the formal learning environment, namely; the school. Another equally significant dimension of the learning environment in a school is its physical environment. The physical environment means facilities in the surrounding area as well as the infrastructure available in the school. A hygienically and aesthetically appealing surrounding provides a congenial physical environment for learning. A minimum infrastructure is considered necessary for facilitating curriculum based learning in a school. The most basic infrastructure is the availability of a school building that has classrooms which can accommodate the student population at different grade levels. The classrooms must have adequate seating provision for the students and teaching-learning aids, like blackboard. Laboratory and library are required as these make teaching-learning environment conducive. The basic amenities like drinking water and separate toilets for boys and girls are other important aspects constituting the physical environment of learning.

In India, the physical environments of schools vary vastly. While some schools have permanent and spacious structures, other schools operate from make shift structures. Most schools do not have laboratories and libraries. A few schools having these structures do not have functioning equipments in the lab and good books in the library. Poor physical environment in a school results in poor learning environment. As we have discussed earlier, learning environment in schools is multidimensional in nature. Therefore, physical environment is only one of the constituents of the learning environment present in a school.

8.5 INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

In the previous section, we tried to understand the composition and need of a formal learning environment in a school. As you are aware that all learning does not take

place in formal set up like a school. Even before joining a school children would have already learnt many things in their life. And of course, we have come across people who have never been to any school but are competent in many areas of learning. In this section, we will discuss informal learning environment.

8.5.1 Home and Community

There are many places that constitute informal environments of learning. Home is the first informal place of learning for a child. The child is initiated into the ways of the family by parents and other adult members. The socialization process of the child begins at home. Gradually, the child is introduced to the social processes of the neighbourhood community of which the family is a part. These two agencies, the family and the community, form the informal environment that has profound impact on the sociocultural and cognitive development of the child. In Unit 2, you have learnt about enculturation and acculturation as a social process of learning. The different ways of community living are learnt informally through the process of enculturation. The home and community environments not only influence the social behaviour but also the academic and cognitive skills of children. Although, intelligence is widely considered as a genetic factor, research has shown coorelation between the quality of the home environment and the child's IQ. Garber and Ware (1970) conducted a study among 133 children, mostly white children belonging to low socioeconomic status, and observed their home environment. They found a significant coorelation as the higher the quality of the home environment the higher was the IQ of the children. The most important home factors were the following:

- The number of books and other learning materials in the home.
- The amount of reward and recognition the children receive from parents for academic achievement.
- The parent's expectation regarding their children's academic achievement.

The three factors mentioned here together create an appropriate learning environment at home. Educational statistics in our country show a very high rate of drop out in the low socioeconomic level families. These children do not live in environments that promote academic and cognitive skills. Nutrition is another environmental factor that affect intellectual development. When children are reared in poor families they do not receive necessary nutrients for growth. Another home related factor that creates an appropriate learning environment is the variety of stimuli the child receives especially during early childhood. According to Bloom (1964), the following three environmental variables are important in developing a child's intellectual abilities.

- The amount of stimulation children receive for verbal development.
- The amount of affection and reward children receive for verbal reasoning accomplishments.
- The amount of encouragement children receive for "active interaction with problems, exploration of the environment and the learning of new skills".

An interactive home environment where family members are able to facilitate learning provides facilitative learning environment for the child.

The attitude of the community and home towards gender equality is a crucial factor in the quality of learning environment for a girl child. Some families and communities that show positive attitude towards the male child's schooling and learning, necessarily do not encourage the girl child. Under such circumstances the girl child may experience the home and community environment as hostile to learning.

Another factor that influences the home and community attitude towards learning is religion. In some communities religious learning is more important than cognitive learning through schooling and other means. The learning environment in such a community is geared towards conforming to the religious practices. For example, if girl's education is not in line with the religious practices of the community, girl children may find the home and community environment disadvantageous for learning other than what is prescribed by the religion.

8.5.2 Mass Media

Today, mass media is all pervasive and omnipresent. Our day-to-day life is inundated with the presence of mass media. We can access mass media through television, radio and print. If, some years ago, radio and print were the main tools of mass communication, television seems to have taken over the place now.

Mass media is informative and influence the thinking of people. It creates a learning environment. Mass media is not controlled by a single agency and what it represents is neither organized learning (as in schools) nor the immediate reality surrounding you (as in home and community). Mass media offers a wide range of information and reality far removed from immediate reality. The informal learning environment created by mass media is intense and far reaching in impact than any other informal learning environment.

Learning through print medium presupposes the ability to read alike. Hence, its reach as an informal learning agency is limited. Radio is more effective than print as the listener requires only comprehension skill. The advent of twenty four hours television channels have redefined the role of mass media as an agency of informal learning. Television is more powerful and effective than radio and print as it exercises greater influence on the viewers through visual images.

Both radio and television appeal to literates and illiterates alike. It was mentioned earlier that the mass media is not an agency of organized learning. However, the mass media is sometimes used by state agencies to effect purposeful and specific learning at a mass level. For example, the family planning, pulse polio, and HIV/AIDS programmes on mass media sponsored by the state are intended to bring about behaviour modification among the masses.

For children who have access to the mass media, especially the television, it becomes an additional and supportive source of learning in the context of organized learning. Children who are exposed to the mass media are well informed and that often facilitate their readiness for new learning in the organized learning context. However, learning through the mass media, especially the television is not always positive or constructive learning. Through television viewing, children often pick up values that are not in conformity with the values of the family, school, or community. Thus, television or any other mass media teaches academic and cognitive skills and social behaviours but it can have both positive and negative influences on children.

These days television and radio are used as supportive agencies in imparting organized learning. For example, the Indira Gandhi National Open University utilizes the electronic media (television and radio) for teaching-learning purposes. We can say that the electronic media is used for creating a virtual learning environment. Through interactive radio counselling students sitting across the country are able to tune in to listen to their teachers and interact with them. Teleconferencing creates interactive virtual classroom. The virtual learning environment created on television or computer is found effective due to the presence of visual images and the use of multimedia. Then, there are non-interactive virtual learning environments, like the telecast of UGC's country-wide-classrooms. Decades ago when television was a rarity, the government of India used All India Radio to educate the Indian farmers about the technological advances in

farming to bring in India's Green Revolution. Thus, mass media can play a significant role in formal and non-formal learning.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) List those home factors that created learning environment for you.

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- 2) Mention the different ways in which mass media can teach academic and cognitive skills.

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8.6 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed the meaning and scope of learning environment. We examined the meaning of learning environment from different theoretical perspectives. We, then, discussed in detail the different learning environments. The formal learning environment is where organized learning takes place. The focus was on school as the formal agency of learning. We analyzed different components of the school system to understand the meaning and scope of the formal learning environment. School is a miniature society, therefore, heterogeneous in nature. The different participants in the school system determine the sociocultural and psychological environment of the school. The psychosocial environment is one component of the total learning environment in the school. Teachers play a significant role in determining the psychosocial environment for individual student's learning. Teachers can also set the physical environment for teaching-learning activities. Teacher behaviour considerably affects the academic performance of individual students. Peer group behaviour is another component in the efficacy of the learning environment for individual students. All these components constitute the psychosocial aspects of the learning environment. Physical environment is another factor that determines and limits the scope of the learning environment in a school. In the following section, we discussed the informal set up of learning. Home and community are two such agencies of informal learning. Enculturation and acculturation are social processes of learning. The academic performance of children is influenced by the kind of learning environment available at home and community. Lastly, we discussed the role played by mass media in informal learning and in creating informal learning environments. These days mass media, especially television, creates virtual learning environments that are very much part of organized learning.

8.7 UNIT END EXERCISES

- 1) What are the characteristics of children who perform well in your school? Do they belong to the dominant group in your school?
- 2) Describe the characteristics of underachievers. Which group do they belong to?
- 3) Observe teachers in your school and describe the psychosocial environment they provide for individual learner.

- 4) During your observation of teachers have you come across any case of self-fulfilling prophecy? Discuss the implications of self-fulfilling prophecy for the students with your colleagues.
- 5) How do home and community factors influence academic achievement?
- 6) Discuss the impact of mass media on desirable and undesirable learning.

8.8 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 9 LEARNING ENVIRONMENT: HOME AND COMMUNITY

Structure

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- 9.2 Objectives
- 9.3 Importance of Home in Early Learning
 - 9.3.1 Home as the First Learning Place
 - 9.3.2 Developmental Context in Early Life and Its Impact on Learning
- 9.4 Types of Home Environment and Learning
 - 9.4.1 Parenting Style and Child Rearing Practices
 - 9.4.2 Types of Home Environment
- 9.5 Community Context and Home Environment: Understanding the Dynamics
 - 9.5.1 Physical, Psychosocial and Cultural Environment
 - 9.5.2 Socialization of the Child in Different Family and Social Settings
 - 9.5.3 Value Inculcation and Learning
- 9.6 Learning in the Community
 - 9.6.1 Home as a Part of Community and Larger Society
 - 9.6.2 Peer Group and Neighbourhood
 - 9.6.3 Community Resources and Learning
- 9.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 9.8 Unit End Exercises
- 9.9 References and Suggested Readings

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Children learn their early lessons of life at home. The socio-emotional and intellectual environment of home determines to a great extent the future course of learning and development. As the child grows, the contours of personal and social space for interaction expand. The child gradually gets introduced to more formal institutional environments such as school. As the exposures increase, the informal settings such as peer groups and formal ones like school get incorporated into the learning framework of the growing child. In fact, this process continues through out life changing and reconstituting the context and components of the social environment of the individual and thereby reshaping the personality in an ongoing manner. In the life-long process of exposure and accommodation, experiences of the early stage of life at home and community leave a lasting impact on the individual's trajectory of learning and development.

This unit discusses the importance of home and community environment in the life of the growing child and how it impacts the learning process of the child. With the help of some real life illustrations, the Unit presents an analytical account of different types of home environments and their influence on different individuals. Further, it discusses the dynamics of home and community environment as it influences the individual's learning style and capabilities.

9.2 OBJECTIVES

After working through this unit, you should be able to:

- understand the importance of home in early learning experiences;
- identify types of home environment and their influence on learning;
- explain different aspects of home environment in the context of learning;
- analyse various issues related to learning and home environment;
- understand the close interaction among home, community and wider social environment; and
- understand how community environment affects learning process.

9.3 IMPORTANCE OF HOME IN EARLY LEARNING

9.3.1 Home as the First Learning Place

Early home environment influences the child's learning throughout life. The kind of experiences, pleasant and unpleasant, that the child goes through at early stage sets the tone and tenor for later development. A sense of security is a basic prerequisite to all development including learning. Children desire a conducive environment at home. During early years the social and emotional environment of home becomes a critical factor in influencing the individual's course of learning and development. Some of the basic strategies and styles of learning in fact begin to be moulded even before the child goes to a formal school. The informal learning endeavours that children engage in at home and in the surrounding community set the tone for their learning explorations in later life.

Learning involves the acquisition of new knowledge, skills, values and dispositions and as it takes shape in the young child's life it is more than intellectual in nature. It is a process located in and influenced by the social and emotional experiences and characteristics of the environment. The nature and quality of emotional experiences and the sense of security and belongingness at home and in the immediate surroundings at the early stages in life and attachments developed are crucial for the learning to take place. If children grow as secure individuals they learn to trust people around them. The attachments children form with parents and siblings last a lifetime, and they serve as models for emotional relationships and learning explorations in the neighbourhood and society. At home they learn the first lessons of life, understand home and physical surroundings; and acquire necessary coping skills and social norms of personal and group behaviour. They learn how to respect family, community and other social groups, how to adjust to others and live together, how to listen, how to give and take, how to forgive, how to appreciate others, and how to think for themselves. Within the family, children also experience their first social conflict. Discipline by parents and arguments with siblings provide children with important lessons in compliance and co-operation and provide opportunities to learn the strategies to influence the behaviour of others. These skills though do not form part of the curriculum based learning outcomes in schools, constitute the basic framework for acquiring knowledge and skills in later life.

Activity 1

Take a few minutes to recall and reflect on your early home experiences and write a brief description of experiences that became lasting in your life.

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9.3.2 Developmental Context in Early Life and Its Impact on Learning

From your experiences you can understand how family and home constitute the child's first and long lasting context for learning and development. The developing infant, the child, the adolescent, and the adult continuously attempt to build on early experiences as they grow into independent individuals. The effects of the quality of home environment during this period are more influential and lasting than any other phase of life. The availability or absence of specific environmental conditions or early deprivations significantly affect the stimulation of the neurological system of an individual critically conditioning response patterns in later life. In early childhood, children are introduced to the physical world through opportunities for play and exploration of objects around them, which are integral to the stimulation process.

Children learn to interact with their environment in random patterns involving sensori-motor coordination of their bodies and limbs in space and to manipulate objects. Gradually they learn to be independent and acquire everyday life skills, like eating, dressing, playing, making friends with others, and so on. As they grow older, they begin to explore the world of objects and people outside home, and individual differences begin to emerge in their style of exploration and areas of interest. They learn to develop a sense of autonomy. They become eager to try out new ideas and actions. Learning to be independent involves acquiring mastery over their environment on the one hand and accepting their capabilities/limitations and willingness to learn to improve on the other. It leads to the development of a positive self-concept. They also acquire a sense of right and wrong and learn to differentiate between good and bad. Further, they acquire language skills, cognitive skills, and social and moral values embedded in the community and cultural context.

As they enter into adolescence, they realise that many demands for new learning are externally imposed. It is at this stage that children come into conflict with their parents, community, and social norms. The struggle is to balance between externally located demands and the internal choices and explorations. Thus home becomes the focus in learning to set priorities for intellectual pursuits and also for socialisation into the ways of the larger community and society to which they belong.

You would have noticed that often, in order to gain a sense of security an adolescent is tempted to accept the standards of behaviour of parents and seek their advice, and is yet pulled towards peers to do as they do even if it means violating parental rules. There is a constant struggle at this stage to strike a balance between independence and dependence. It is hard but necessary to achieve a complete balance between warmth and guidance, and autonomy and support. Parents can help them plan and acquire skills of time management, choosing friends, and developing positive attitude towards themselves and life in general.

9.4 TYPES OF HOME ENVIRONMENT AND LEARNING

9.4.1 Parenting Style and Child Rearing Practices

We are familiar with the saying that child grows into the direction initiated by parents through their practices and behaviours. It is useful to differentiate and understand the different types of home environment and how they influence learning in the growing individual. Home environment is essentially shaped and characterised by the child rearing practices adopted by parents. There is no one right method of child rearing to be used by every family and everywhere. However, there are certain child rearing practices, which provide a conducive environment for appropriate growth, and learning in the children. In such an environment, the child rearing practices help the growing child to develop a sense of confidence and then to acquire sense of autonomy and independence. This helps the child in learning by allowing her or him to incorporate new knowledge and skills in an expanding intellectual framework. It is necessary to recognise that child rearing is an interactive continuous process, in which children and parents learn to grow together, and reform their relationships. The interactions between parents and their children include the parents' expression of their attitudes, values, interests, and beliefs, which in turn influence the child's own value systems as learning styles and capabilities.

To sum up, types of home environment, determined mainly by the child rearing practices, is generally understood in terms of the ways the parents handle the child in areas of nurturing, protecting, training, disciplining, teaching and giving opportunities to develop and achieve to the best of his/her ability. These childhood experiences of rearing, training and learning have their effects not only in shaping the present state of the child but also his or her future development and learning.

9.4.2 Types of Home Environment

Let us go through the following cases and understand different types of home environment and parenting styles, and their impact on learning.

Raja comes from a home where everyone including his mother is scared of his father. As soon as the father enters home all of them start moving here and there. Raja, his brother and sister cannot express their views freely at home. Everyone has to listen to father. They have to take permission from the father for every little thing. They are afraid that they will be punished severely if they do not obey. They have to follow a schedule for doing different tasks at home, to play or to watch TV, even to study.

Amol's parents remain quite busy in their work. Amol's every demand is fulfilled by them. They generally do not bother about when he returns home from the school or go out. Whenever he asks for money or anything, they give him without much questioning. They do not have time to sit and talk to him. Basically, Amol feels that there is nobody at home who cares for him or is concerned about him. Gradually, Amol drifted and began neglecting his school work. Obviously, this affected his learning and began showing in his performance in the school.

Everybody finds Raghu and Lakshmi loveable. They clearly present a picture of happy and joyful childhood. Their parents make it a point to spend at least sometime every day talking to them and playing with them. At home, they have been given opportunity to express their ideas and views freely. Though their parents constantly watch and guide them, no decisions are imposed on them arbitrarily. This has helped them to become independent and confident individuals. They feel free to explore new things in their environment inside and outside their home. They do not hesitate in taking risk and in making mistakes.

The environment at home has given them a sense of security which has in turn helped them in their learning.

**Learning Environment:
Home and Community**

Activity 2

Write below your observations on the above cases. How the cases are different from each other? How would you characterise each case? What differences do you find in the parenting styles?

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Let us review here the observations possible on these cases. In the first case, one finds an authoritarian parenting style. Parents who use an authoritarian style are also demanding, but they place such a high value on conformity that they are unresponsive - even outright rejecting - when children are unwilling to obey. 'Do it because I say so' is the attitude of these parents. As a result they engage in very little give and take with children. Children are expected to accept an adult's word in an unquestioning manner. If children do not obey, authoritarian parents resort to force and punishment. The authoritarian style is clearly biased in favour of parents' needs; children's expression and independence are suppressed. Consequently, when such children interact with their peers, they tend to react with hostility whenever their views are not accepted and feel frustrated. In adolescence, young people with authoritarian parents continue to be less well adjusted than those exposed to a democratic style.

The second case represents the permissive or indifferent style of child rearing. It is apparently nurturant and accepting, but it avoids making demands or imposing controls of any kind. Permissive parents allow children to make many of their decisions at an age when they are not capable of doing so. They can eat meals and go to bed when they feel like and watch as much television as they want. They are permitted to interrupt and annoy others without any parental restraint. These children are found to grow up as immature learners and they generally have difficulty controlling their impulses. They may grow to be disobedient and rebellious whenever a demand is made on them to do tasks that conflict with their momentary desires and comforts. For many of them hard work and persistent attention to learning tasks may prove to be an extremely difficult proposition. They are also overly demanding and dependent on adults. Particularly in adolescence, continued parental indulgence is likely to lead to poor self control and less focused attention to the learning tasks in the school and result in gradual loss of interest in learning as a whole.

The third case represents democratic authoritative parents who make reasonable demands on the children. They express warmth and affection, listen patiently to the child's point of view, and encourage participation in family decision making. In sum, this kind of child rearing creates a rational and democratic ambience at home that recognises and respects the rights of both parents and children. These children grow to be lively and happy, self confident in exploring and mastering new tasks, and self controlled in their ability to resist engaging in disruptive acts. These children also generally display less traditional gender role behaviour. They exhibit higher self esteem, social and moral maturity, involvement in school learning and academic achievement. Nurturant parents who are secure in the standards they hold for their children provide model of caring, concern as well as confident, assertive behaviour. They are also

more effective as reinforcing agents, praising children for striving to meet their expectations. These parents let children know that they are competent individuals who can do things successfully. Since democratic parents continually try to adapt themselves to children's growing competence, their practices change with age.

In child rearing practices, including rewards and punishment, it is important for the parent not to take out his/her frustration on children. Most parents use punishment as one of the major approaches to child rearing. Unfortunately, many such parents do not remain consistent and respond to the child often on the basis of their own moods than the child's behaviour. On a day when the father is happy and in good mood, he would play and read out stories to the child. The next day, the father would be in a foul mood, and if the child asked to read out a story, he would be curtly called 'a pest bothering his father all the time.' How will the child figure it out? After many such experiences, the child is likely to stop asking his father for anything; become withdrawn and anxious about how his father is likely to react. Children need consistency in their lives. Of course, they will eventually learn to live in an inconsistent world. But at home, it is best if the parents are as consistent as possible in responding to the child on the basis of the child's behaviour. Extreme inconsistency at home may produce uncertainty, anxiety, and seriously affect their concentration and attention to learning tasks.

Children learn many of the socio emotional and cognitive behaviours through observing and imitating people who are significant to them, such as parents. Children often imbibe their parents' fears and biases, and they often try to act the way their parents act. Very often, you will find children getting angry when things do not happen their way. They learn from observing their parents that it is alright to get angry. But, this is not what parents want to teach. It is very important that parents set an example to their children rather than preaching them what to do and what not to do. A parent can model such basic behaviours as being honest, compassionate and understanding and handling conflicts through reasoning.

A very common tendency among parents is to compare their children with others, and failing to understand the individual differences. Parents often do not realize the harmful effect of such invidious comparison on the child, by projecting the ability or superiority of one child over another. This creates a sense of inadequacy in children finally resulting in an irrational "fear of failure."

Unreasonable expectations of parents tend to curb the development of children and push them to live with a perpetual feeling of guilt as they cannot meet the standards set by their parents. It affects their learning process severely distorting their long term goals and styles of learning.

Decision making and independence training are important aspects of child rearing practices. Often one finds that many parents take decisions about children without knowing the opinion of children. This may be about trivial issues such as wearing a dress, or going out to places, or it could be the very vital decisions such as career options or selecting a life partner. This may work out in early stages of growth, but in the long run, it erodes the confidence and ability of the child to explore learning areas independently.

A note of caution is required in understanding the parenting styles and their impact on the learning of children. The above observations on the impact of different parenting styles are only indicative of broad trends. Influence of parenting styles is not altogether irreversible. One may come across exceptional children who overcome the adverse impact of wrong parenting styles and unfavourable home environments. But, they are exceptions. Many children succumb to the pressures and fail in their learning endeavours for no fault of their own, but due to inappropriate practices adopted by parents. Positive impact of a conducive home environment on the child's personality as a whole and the learning process in particular is all pervasive over the life.

Check Your Progress 1

Note : Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) Write down the features of the different parenting styles.
 - a) Authoritarian :
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 - b) Permissive :
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 - c) Democratic/authoritative :
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- 2) Which of the three parenting styles is the most desirable one according to you? Why?

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9.5 COMMUNITY CONTEXT AND HOME ENVIRONMENT: UNDERSTANDING THE DYNAMICS

9.5.1 Physical, Psychosocial and Cultural Environment

We discussed in the previous section how child rearing practices influence the pattern of growth and development of the child in general and personal learning style and thinking processes in particular. Every home is to some extent a microcosm of the community in which it is located. The traditions, customs, norms of relationships and inter-personal interactions prevalent in the community may significantly influence child-rearing practices and the interaction patterns between parents and children at home. It is essential, therefore, to study and analyse the physical, psychosocial and cultural characteristics of the community context in which the child is growing up in order to understand her/his development and learning.

To understand the relationship between home environment and community, let us read the case given below.

Arun and his sister Anu lived in a small town with their parents and grand parents. They had a big house with a lot of space to play. Every evening, all the children of the neighbourhood gathered near their house and played cricket and other games. They had lot of fun in celebrating different festivals. Children in the neighbourhood would organise different programmes and invite their parents. Arun and Anu enjoyed being with their friends. Anu was encouraged to help her mother at home. Their school was very near to their house. Life changed for them dramatically when their father got transferred to Bombay. They started

living in a small apartment. There was no open space at home or outside to play. Both of them felt miserable in the new environment as they were used to living in a big house with many people around. It was strange for them not to find children to play with and to travel by bus to go to school. At home, they also found it amusing that the father who never helped mother earlier started helping in daily chores.

Activity 3

After reading the case, characterise the changes in the community context in which the family lived and list the factors influencing the home environment for the children.

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One can easily make the distinction between urban vs rural and joint vs nuclear family settings. One can also find gender stereotyping practices inherent in the functions to be performed at home in the two contexts.

Let us now discuss how the changing community characteristics influence children's learning.

Urban vs Rural Residence and Learning

In the later half of 20th century, urbanization and the growth of cities have been the most significant developmental factors influencing child rearing practices and human relationship patterns. We know that living in a city or in a town or in a village make a big difference in the way we organise our lives. Rural societies tend to incorporate nature's concerns in their worldview, while urban societies often overlook environmental issues even if out of compulsion. It is a challenge to the people in urban centres to reconstruct the links between nature and nurture. However, cities also create and nurture their own culture - different ways of living and patterns of relationships. Urban culture brings with it new dynamics, creating tensions arising from population density and spatial proximity. To make life in cities agreeable, spaces have to be created for cultural expressions such as music, theatre and art. The availability of such spaces is critical for the intellectual development and learning for a growing child.

Some people characterise the quality of life in urban areas superior, though some others hold an exactly opposite view. However, it is not a matter of being superior or inferior. It is different and one can characterise the differences as alternative living styles and opportunities. The main advantages and disadvantages probably derive from the greater concentration of power and opportunities in urban areas, while children in rural areas may have more direct experience of nature. These differences are greater among some urban and rural localities than others, and there may also be important differences in the experiences and opportunities available to particular groups of people within each community.

In urban areas with multi-story buildings, there is hardly any space for children to play. There is no opportunity for children for physical exercise and interaction with the same age group children. If living conditions are favourable, children have a better chance for growth and learning and develop their full potential. If living conditions are poor, children suffer from a variety of diseases and deficiencies which affect adversely their health and psychomotor skills.

A commonly expressed myth is that rural children are less intelligent than urban children. It is true that children in rural areas have fewer opportunities for interaction and exposure to intellectual challenges in schooling. However, it is also true that children in rural areas develop insight into life's processes in a deeper sense through non-formal and direct involvement. The contextual variations influence the way children develop their thinking and information processing capabilities. This also influences their styles and habits of learning, both in formal and informal contexts.

Tribal communities

All communities are not always of the rural urban kind. Some communities have typical cultural histories making them unique in many ways. These settings also influence learning of children. This is particularly important in the context of modern school based learning as these communities invariably have indigenous non-formal socialisation and educational processes for knowledge and skill building among the youngsters. We shall discuss some of these issues here in the context of tribal groups.

Through centuries of living close to nature, people from tribal communities have acquired detailed and personalised knowledge of their environment and its natural resources. They possess a unique understanding of the functioning of the eco-system, the properties of plants and animals and the techniques for using and managing these systems. Their children grow to learn about these knowledge systems in an informal manner. Similar to the life of the tribal communities being closely related to nature and environment, their social relationships and interaction patterns are also unique. Unfortunately, as pointed out by many observers, the uniform structure and transaction of curriculum adopted in formal schools offers no space or opportunity for the children from such unique background to utilise and build on the knowledge and skill base they bring with them. It is of critical importance to establish relevance of the school based formal learning in their life contexts. The lack of connectivity may lead to a sharp division between home and school and negatively influence the interest of children in school learning.

9.5.2 Socialization of the Child in Different Family and Social Settings

Socialization results from the variety of encounters between children and the adults around them, beginning with parents and other members of the family, and later extending to the members of the larger community. In these encounters the child extends his or her perceptions by first identifying roles and then enacting some of them, through the use of language and in all those activities, which are broadly labelled as play. Through language and play, the children locate themselves in the world they see and experience. They enhance their participation in the context around by accepting the roles and functions they have to undertake as they grow into full adulthood. In this process of growing up and performing, children sort out, choose, and try out the ones they choose in uniquely individual manner. The process is both vocal and quiet, and it does not end with childhood although it does not remain as vigorous an activity once the children have found their place in the world at least temporarily acceptable to them. The learning styles and thinking processes that children acquire are intricately embedded into the socialisation processes in the family and the community they live in.

The differences in the socialization practices of different families get translated into differences in the structured learning experiences provided to children. Middle class families have more resources at their disposal than poor families. They employ more educative patterns of interaction, and are more likely to expand and enrich the variety of developmental experiences of their children. In contrast the poor resources of families and other disadvantages operate as limiting factors in shaping the development and learning styles of their children, leading to low self-esteem and restricted acquisition of social skills and competencies.

If you look beyond the community to the cultural group, you would notice the socialization patterns differ in different cultural contexts. These vary from relatively simple and unsophisticated to complex and rich, from rigid to flexible, from principled to opportunistic, from compassionate and universal to restrictive and exploitative practices. Each of these tends to shape the child's style and capability to process information and establish personal competencies and habits of learning. Thus, it is possible to say that differing sets of parenting styles, different situations, circumstances and problems, and different socio-cultural contexts, have numerous implications for learning among young children.

You may have also observed that some family and social situations provide greater scope for structured and organized learning experiences to the children while some others limit them from gaining such experiences. Middle class parenting styles reflect sharing of experiences, responsibilities and participation in decision making at work, because of which they find negotiation and explanation with children meaningful and rational. In contrast, working class parents experience direction and subordination at work, and see little point in discussion, explanation and negotiation with children and thus pursue authoritarian parenting styles. However, there is no ideal family or social setting and no ideal set of socialization practices, which can allow full development and learning of children. Nor can it be assumed that the range of social situations existing in most societies are adequate to facilitate the full realisation or achievement of human potential for learning. There are numerous cases of children from very impoverished social contexts demonstrating high academic performance. The relationship of family and community characteristics with learning of children need to be examined in relation to their context.

It emerges that parenting is to a good extent socially determined, with some parents holding substantial competencies and resources at their disposal, and be able to act in ways they consider right, while others, having severely limited resources are subject to forces operating upon them, including the consequences of actions of other people. Hence, any changes in parenting that can be beneficial to all children would require changes in the structure and operation of societies, and in the ways people act on their beliefs, and with respect to each other. Correspondingly, efforts that involve changes in means or which are essentially instrumental in nature, appear to be relatively ineffective where parents do not see such means as relevant for them and for their children. The differences among parents in their material, social and personal resources or in their economic, political and cultural characteristics are reflected in the contributions they make to their children's development and learning from the outset, and these prove to be significant in shaping the capacity of the children as they grow.

The social class related differences in child rearing practices can also be understood in terms of different life conditions in different income group families. Education itself contributes to social class differences in child rearing practices. Middle class parents with higher levels of schooling tend to stimulate their children through talking and grant them more freedom to explore. When their children are older, they use detailed explanations, verbal praise, and inductive discipline. Middle class parents' interest in verbal stimulation helps their children to learn to think independently. In contrast, the

constant stresses that accompany poor families gradually weaken their family organisation. When daily crises arise, parents become depressed, irritable, and distracted. Marital conflict often makes parenting less nurturant and involved regarding the children's development. Consequently, learning in the school and their formal skill acquisition during the crucial period of the child's life gets adversely affected.

9.5.3 Value Inculcation and Learning

The source of values lies in interactive behaviour between the parent and child. A child's earliest conception of what is right and what is wrong, good or bad, is in terms of rules and expectations of elders particularly the parents referring to specific acts and situations. Parents are the primary social agents who transmit personal and social values to their children. It is well known that the behaviour of others constitutes a powerful influence on the way children act by observation, imitation, significant identification etc. Identification, a concept derived from psychoanalysis, refers to the process that leads the child to think, feel, and behave as though he/she possessed the characteristics of the significant other person called the model of identification. In fact, identification is the basic process through which children learn moral standards and behaviours.

When children are able to adopt parental standards it makes them feel similar to their parents. Identification with a stronger parent may be an important source of security for a young child. Most parents display some beliefs about the characteristics they would like to see in their children and the child rearing methods they would use to attain them. It is in this context that parental warmth is regarded as an important element of the socialization process for several reasons. First, the child would like to have the parent's approval and will feel distressed at the prospect of the loss of love or a warm parent. Second, it is easy to teach the child to internalise social rules and identify with a warm and nurturant parent. Third, warmth and nurturance by parents are found associated with security, low anxiety and high self esteem in the child. Child rearing practices are found to make significant contribution to the development of values. The parent who talks and reasons with the child about his/her misbehaviour is likely to provide the child with a clear understanding of what he/she did wrong. Value development in children is facilitated if the parents own values are not overtly rigid.

Parental modelling can be a powerful influence on the development of the child. Parents should be careful about their own behaviour in family interactions and social relations. The child will not be able to share feelings with others unless relationship between the two parents and parent and child are secure. Moreover parents cannot tell their children to have good interpersonal relations with other people, unless their own relations with others are sincerely established.

As children grow older parents should provide them opportunities to exchange viewpoints, and attitudes on various moral and social issues. They should also allow children to participate in family decision making. Parent-child verbal interaction, such as discussing, arguing, or planning are other ways to help social development. In traditional families, children are generally taught to obey and pay respect to parents and older adults. Opportunity to exchange opinions and attitudes with them is unlikely.

Children's books and programmes can be used as tools by parents to assist children. Children can learn a great deal about the social world through reading books, listening to radio and watching television or film. For example, books about home and family, urban and rural lives, occupation and people in different cultures and nationalities, success stories of people, a kind man or a woman, all convey important facts and ideas about life in the social world that would be difficult for children to experience directly.

Check Your Progress 2

Note : Write your answers in the space given below.

1) Point out the different ways in which contexts influence learning.

(a) Urban

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(b) Rural

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(c) Tribal

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2) How do class differences in socialization affect child learning?

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3) Explain the concept of 'identification'. How do children learn values through the process of 'identification'?

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9.6 LEARNING IN THE COMMUNITY

9.6.1 Home as a Part of Community and Larger Society

As noted earlier, home is a part of the community and larger society which separately and interactively transmit to the young children a variety of experiences, knowledge base and mental predispositions towards learning. Cultures are often regarded as unified systems of ideas and beliefs of people in a society. It is true that basic ideas do recur uniformly in several cultures because cultures have partly common roots, built on similar human experiences and in the course of history have often learned from each other. Yet, cultural differences would often exist along gender, class, religion, caste, language, ethnicity, and other fault lines, which deeply influence the young as they grow. Different faiths stand as cultural, symbolic and intellectual creations which reflect the diversity of human experiences and the ways in which people accept the promise, challenge and tragedy of human life.

It is well known that ties with the community and society help in reducing family stress and enhancing child development. There are several reasons. First, social support

offers interpersonal acceptance. A neighbour or a relative who listens sympathetically and tries to relieve a parent's concern enhances self esteem. The parent in turn is likely to behave more sensitively toward children. For families experiencing economic strain, social networks influence parenting indirectly but in a significant manner by reducing mother's feeling of economic and social burden. Second, social networks provide parents with opportunities to exchange valuable information, goods, and services. It also offers child rearing controls and role models. Friends and relatives may advise and demonstrate effective ways of interacting with children. They also provide warmth, stimulation and exposure to a wider array of competent models.

Gender has been one of the most sensitive issues in a changing world. The extent of gender identity is relational. It affects not only the inner person in his or her self-representation, but also the outer one in his or her exercise of power. Every culture offers its children an account of the existence of the two genders and their multiple roles according to work, marriage, and age, and provides them with broad guidance on how to handle the relationships between them. There can be no substitute for this kind of account and guidance transmitted to individuals through a bundle of attitudes, narratives, images and myths.

The cultural interpretation of gender is central to the identity of every individual. A new emphasis on gender, as a relational concept has opened up possibilities for looking at the full range of social and cultural institutions which reproduce gender hierarchies and gender based inequalities having far reaching consequences on the self-concept of the child as well as the learning dispositions and interests.

9.6.2 Peer Group and Neighbourhood

As children grow older their social world expands. They begin to look out side their home and toward other children in their neighbourhood as their companions and play mates. With change in their play interests comes an increasing desire to be with and be accepted by children outside home. Becoming socialized is one of the major developmental tasks of this period. Children become members of a peer group, which will incrementally reduce the family influence on their attitudes and behaviour. The peer group as defined by Havighurst, is an aggregation of people of approximately the same age who feel and act together.

Children learn to redirect their egocentric interests into channels that promote the group's interest and thus move towards other centredness. Peer interactions in general and peer conflicts and arguments in particular are the necessary conditions to learn to accept other's point of view. In the course of such interactions, the child is forced to examine his/her own contentions. Therefore, experience with peers is needed to breakdown the egocentrism of the child and to allow him/her to consider other perspectives. As role taking abilities emerge, the child could engage in reciprocal social behaviour, such as cooperation, discussion and planning with others. Piaget suggested a bidirectional causal relationship : peer interaction is a necessary factor for the development of the role taking skills. The greater an individual's participation in a social group, the more opportunities one has to take the social perspectives of others.

Thus, peer relationships undoubtedly play a meaningful part in the development of social skills in children. A child with good social skills is likely to be popular among the peers, having higher social competence in several areas, such as leadership, and ability to get along with others. To allow children to interact with their age mates is perhaps to help them to build good social relations with their peers. According to developmental and social psychologists, social perspective taking is the central mechanism a child has for acquiring the ability to understand own behaviour from the other's point of view. This ability conveys to the child the need to recognise that others' thoughts and feelings may be different from oneself. He or she must learn to take, that is to internalise others' view points. This enables him or her to restructure the way he or she perceives and feels about a particular issue. Once the child develops this skill s/he can

communicate more accurately with other people in different social situations. Researches reveal that social perspective taking skill is a prerequisite for desirable social cognitions such as moral reasoning and problem - solving thinking, and social behaviours such as better peer interaction and behavioural adjustment.

Parents can promote social perspective taking skills of their children through child rearing. The warm, affectionate and nurturant relationship between the parents and the child makes the child feel secure and comfortable, and thus reduces the feeling of self-concern, fear or dislike, while making him or her aware of others' thoughts and feelings.

9.6.3 Community Resources and Learning

Every generation inherits from its ancestors a wealth of tangible and intangible cultural resources that embody the collective memory of communities across the world. An awareness of their responsibility to preserve this fragile wealth tends to get crystallised around built environment: historic monuments and sights and enrichment of museum collections. It has become a world wide movement now to preserve the historical monuments. It is also the pride of international cultural co-operation, as it cements solidarity between people for a common cause. Their sustained existence means that the assets of heritage are not merely evidence of a bygone past that is valued in itself and protected. There are forces emanating from it which actually enter into living practices-mythical, spiritual or ritual behaviour. While generally serving the myth making process, they also have great potential for examining and questioning unproved traditions, skewed myths and conventional values.

Within the above framework of preserved heritage, museums have come to play an important part in defining the meaning of culture, and creating explicit or implicit systems of value for defining their importance. Museums are both repositories and sources of information. The museum resources form information of many kinds. They include material relevant to studies of environment of local and national culture.

Schools and parents should help the children in exploring the social world directly by taking them out to such places. There are many places which are appropriate as well as valuable for children to visit, for example, museums, libraries, parks, banks, airports, markets, theatres, and zoo. Taking a trip to a near by village is another way to introduce children to people who have different ways of living.

These are only some illustrations of how to use community resources for learning. In reality, the situations would vary widely in terms of what is available for use as learning resources. Yet, every context - urban, rural, tribal, and so on - have abundant possibilities for creating learning opportunities for children. It essentially depends on the ingenuity and innovativeness of teachers and parents. In fact, children are the best judge of what they want. Allowing them to choose contents based on their natural curiosity and interest can go a long way in exploiting local community resources for learning.

9.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have tried to understand how home environment is crucial for child's learning and development. It also presents the social and developmental context in early life and its impact on learning. Further, it analyses the different types of home environment - democratic, authoritarian, and indifferent or permissive style of parenting and their influence on learning with the help of the real life illustrations. Discussion of different cases should be helpful in understanding the various types of home environment like, urban-rural, tribal-nontribal context, joint and nuclear family settings, and gender stereotyping. Finally, focus has been on how community and society context and home environment affect the socialization of the child and lead to value inculcation through various learning experiences. This has been highlighted by discussing how home is part of the community and the broader social and cultural context.

9.8 UNIT END EXERCISES

- 1) Home is the first and crucial learning space. Discuss.
- 2) Visit a couple of homes in your neighbourhood, observe the parenting style in these homes. Present your observations in your group.
- 3) Children learn from their peers. Illustrate.

9.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 10 LEARNING IN THE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT

Structure

- 10.1 Introduction
- 10.2 Objectives
- 10.3 What is School Environment?
 - 10.3.1 Physical Environment
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10.1 INTRODUCTION

Apart from the home and family, the school in which one studies is a major influence on an individual. To which school a child should be admitted is an important decision for parents. Like individuals, schools do differ from one another. Studies on twins reared in different environments have shown that they grow into different personalities. Similarly, children schooled in different types of schools may be intellectually, socially, morally and emotionally different and manifest different behaviours. Hence, for a student of education, a study of school environment and its types is essential for understanding the nature of learning among children in different schools.

In this unit, you would study school environment in terms of physical, psychological, social, cultural and political dimensions and the dynamism of relationship across these dimensions. Apart from knowing about an environment-based classification of schools, you would be studying the influences of school and classroom environment on the learner and the process of learning.

10.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- know the meaning of school environment;
- understand the components of school environment;
- explain the dynamism of relationship between the components of school environment;
- classify schools based on environment;
- explain the nature of influence of school environment on the learner;
- differentiate between the planned and unplanned influences of school environment;
- describe the influence of teacher on learners;
- justify that classroom is a miniature society;
- discuss the nature and influence of classroom environment on the learner;
- outline the characteristics of positive classroom climate;
- explain the relationship between curriculum and school environment; and
- understand that e-learning creates a unique environment for the learners.

10.3 WHAT IS SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT?

Broadly speaking, environment refers to *one's surrounding*. The surrounding of an individual can be viewed from several perspectives. A slogan like 'Keep your surroundings clean' refers to using mainly your physical environment. Whereas, the statement 'She grew up in an unhappy surrounding' would refer to one's psychological environment'. Even though everything that surrounds an individual has the potential to influence that individual, no individual may interact with every element of her/his surrounding. Since one has to interact with elements of one's surrounding to influence or to be influenced, it may be appropriate to view one's environment as that part of one's surrounding with which he/she interacts. School environment, then would refer to that part of one's school surrounding with which he/she interacts on a regular basis. Thus if we have to understand the nature of the influence of school environment on a learner, we have to understand what constitutes the surrounding of a learner. Some elements of school environment are discussed in this unit.

10.3.1 Physical Environment

Physical environment of a school is composed of its physical surrounding and facilities in which a learner finds oneself while in school. In the absence of the minimum essential standard for running a school, we commonly find that the physical surroundings and facilities differ from school to school. You might already be familiar with some of the following instances of schools varying in their physical environment.

Case 1:

A rural lower primary school like others managed by the Government has classes from I to IV. It is a vernacular medium monograde school wherein each class is assigned to one teacher who is required to teach all subjects to that class. The school has a total number of four teachers apart from a Head Mistress. The strength of the school is 146 out of which 81 are boys and 65 are girls.

The school is located on the main road in about 44 cents of land and the building, which is fairly old, is almost in a dilapidated condition. The built up area of the

school is about 400 sq. fts, and it falls short of 460 sq. fts., which, as per the norms, is the minimum area required for appointment of a sweeper for maintenance. It has a large hall of 80x20 feet and a room of 20x20 feet. The hall accommodates classes II, III and IV whereas, the room accommodates class I, HM's office, and staff room. Mid-day meal is also cooked in this room and the teaching aids and a cupboard are also kept in it.

A community member who did not have children donated the school building. But now, his relatives who are the legal heirs want the property back due to its high commercial value. Hence, the building has not been maintained for a long time and the walls and floors are badly damaged. The roof can fall any time and has been declared unsafe by the engineers of the public works department. One part of the building is dark and dingy with little ventilation. The building is under litigation for the last 10 years.

The school has no toilet facility. Drinking water is available in the form of an open well and a bore well just outside the school. A little space in the front and at the back is available for children to play. Children are provided with wooden planks to sit on.

Case 2:

A rural upper primary school is run by a private management. This school has regional language as the medium of instruction. It was started about 90 years back and draws children within a radius of 1.5 kms. The school manager is the Headmaster and his wife the assistant. The management runs three other schools.

The lower primary section i.e. classes from I to IV has seven female teachers apart from the manager. The school received an award as the best school that caters to the SC students. The staff room and the HM's rooms are in one block, which is newly constructed. The three sections of standard I are in one building and standards II and III are in another building, which also houses a library room. The IVth standard along with the Vth, VIth and VIIth are in another building. The buildings are close to each other and have the necessary facilities of toilet, electricity and drinking water. The school building is old but neatly white washed with meaningful quotations written at several places. The building has corridors on all four sides. The staff and HM's room have a RCC roof, whereas the other rooms are tile roofed. The rooms are spacious and confirm to the Education Act of 1959, according to which the classroom must have a size of 200 sq.ft. i.e. 20x20x12. On three sides of its building, the school has a well maintained garden. On the fourth side is the school playground, which is about two acres in area.

The expectation of two reasonably large, weather-safe rooms for primary schools is far from ambitious, yet it remains unrealised in the majority of schools in India. Most schools function from open areas under a tree, rented rooms, or crumbling structures with leaking roofs, bad lighting, no sanitary or drinking water facility, and few resources. The above stated cases are just two types of schools. You can see that schools can be placed on a continuum from poor-impoverished to rich-affluent physical environments.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) What is school environment?

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- 2) List any four aspects of school environment that constitute its physical environment.

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10.3.2 Psychological Environment

If building, space and facilities provide physical environment to a school, its philosophy and practices provide a psychological environment to it. The psychological environment of a school would refer to the *stimuli that impinge upon the learner's psyche in the school*. For example, the attitude of the principal and teachers towards a learner would act as a stimulus for the learner to do or not do certain things in the school.

As you would normally find, most teachers have their favourite students in the class and that they are usually the so-called *good students* of the class. Imagine the class where teachers have only one such favourite student and teachers give importance to that student on every occasion. Like a pampered child at home, this student would grow as an individual characterized by a tendency to be rather aggressive and dominant over others. By pampering, children are taught that they can take without giving. Their wishes are everyone else's commands. This may sound like a wonderful situation, until you realize that the pampered child fails in two ways. First, he/she doesn't learn to do things for himself/herself, and discovers later that he/she is truly behind. Secondly, he/she doesn't learn any other way to deal with others than giving the commands. And society responds to pampered people only in one way: hatred.

On the contrary, imagine a class where the teachers are always suspicious of some children's ability and where they doubt or criticise the children, they need to defend themselves from such occurrences and hence may avoid expressing their true self. In such a psychological environment, you may find a child who grows into a sensitive person and has developed a shell around him, which protects him. They learn about inferiority in the class because they are told and shown every day that they are of no value. They learn to be selfish because they are taught to trust no one. If you haven't known love, you don't develop a capacity to love. We should note that the neglected children include not only orphans and the victims of abuse, but also the children whose parents are never there, and the ones raised in a rigid, authoritarian manner.

School thus has a role that is strategic as well as indispensable in the development of healthy personality. For example, much attention has been given to the conflict between the democratic tradition to which the school is dedicated and certain anti-democratic practices and attitudes to which it is often prone, like authoritarianism in human relations, competitiveness rather than cooperation in the classroom, caste and religion based segregation, and other less tangible forms of inter group discriminations.

10.3.3 Social Environment

Every school provides to its students a social environment in addition to the physical and the psychological environment. As you know, a learner is not alone in a school. He/she is surrounded by other learners as well as the influential adults, the teachers. The *social surrounding* of a school constitutes its social environment. A learner is in constant interaction with the peers and teachers for a significant part of the day he/she spends in the school. Be it studies, playing, quarrelling or simply gossiping, the learner has someone around. Every interaction and interpersonal relationship of a learner occurs in a social environment. One's interaction with others in a social environment is also known as socialisation. It is the process whereby individuals are

made aware of the behaviour that others expect of them related to the norms, values and culture of their society. *Agents of socialization* include the family, school, friendship groups, religious institutions and the mass media.

In collective undertakings with the peer group students learn and practice the social virtues of cooperation, self-sacrifice and loyalty, while outdoor activities offer many opportunities for the exercise of daring, resourcefulness, self-reliance and initiative. Many social skills, habits, attitudes and prejudices of individual students are tried out, tested and refined in the social environment of the school.

10.3.4 Cultural Environment

Another component is the cultural environment, as inhabitants in different regions pursue different traditions, customs, rituals etc. and thus differences in culture. Why do the Chinese dislike milk and milk products? Why do the Hindus perform rituals to invoke the rain god? Why do some nations trace descent through the father, others through the mother, and still others through both parents? Not because different people have different instincts, not because they were destined by God or fate to different habits, not because the weather is different in different countries or regions, but because *they had been brought up that way*.

By *culture* is meant the total life ways, the social legacy the individual acquires from his/her group. Culture can also be regarded as part of the environment created by human beings. Culture is used in its broadest anthropological sense to include all that is humanly fabricated, endowed, designed, articulated, conceived, or directed. Culture includes products that are humanly produced, both material (buildings, artifacts, factories, slum housing), and immaterial (ideology, value systems, mores), as well as materially derived products such as social class and the socio/political order. A humble cooking pot is as much a cultural product as a Beethoven sonata. Culture is a way of thinking, feeling and believing. It is the group's knowledge stored up in memories of men and things they do and in books and objects for future.

A good deal of human behaviour can be understood and predicted if we know the culture of the inhabitants, which is their design or road map for living. Many acts are neither accidental nor due to personal peculiarities. Nor are these caused by supernatural forces or are simply mysterious. Even those of us who pride ourselves on individualism follow most of the time a pattern not of our own making. We brush our teeth on arising, eat two meals a day-not three or four, we sleep in a bed and not in a hammock. One need not know the individual and his life history to be able to predict these, and other countless regularities, including those implicit in the thinking process.

Cultural determinism is one sided like biological determinism. Culture arises out of human nature, and its forms are restricted both by man's biology and natural laws. It is equally true that culture channels biological processes- vomiting, weeping, fainting, sneezing, the daily habits of food intake and waste elimination. When a man eats, he is reacting to an internal drive, namely; hunger contractions consequent upon the lowering of blood sugar, but his precise reaction to these internal stimuli cannot be predicted by physiological knowledge alone. Whether a healthy adult feels hungry twice, three times, or four times a day and the hours at which this feeling recurs is a question of culture.

One never sees culture as such. What are seen are regularities in the behaviour or artefacts of a group that adhere to a common tradition. One never sees an electromagnetic field but the happenings that can be seen, may be given an abstract formulation by assuming that the electromagnetic field exists. Obviously, every school presents to its learners an environment characterized by practices that is its *cultural environment*.

You know the school environment has a two way relationship with political environment. It is influenced by political environment as well as influences it. You may be familiar with the myth that poor parents do not care about educating their children which is astonishingly widespread in official circles, where it provides a convenient rationalization for India's low schooling levels. On the contrary, the typical fathers and mothers are quite keen that their children receive good education, despite their little faith in the system's ability to impart such education.

In rural India in particular, sending a child to school on a regular basis requires a great deal of effort and sacrifice on the part of the child and his or her parents. Other impelling factors include prohibitive costs - often indirect, no school within easy reach, a hostile environment at school, lack of support and lack of progress at school, all of which sap the morale of parents and children. In the light of these obstacles it is easy to understand why so many children are out of school even when their parents express a strong interest in education.

Imagine that a town has one government and one private school within walking distance from each other. Would both of these schools be equally attractive to every parent in town to educate their children? Or will they be equally easily accessible to every child for admission? You know that they would not be. On one hand, the socio-political status of the parent determines the choice, and on the other hand the economic status of parents would dictate the decision.

All people in a society do not belong to the same social class. You would find that every community consists of the dominant and subordinate social classes. The Indian caste system has created social classes and a stratification of society, where one caste group tries to dominate over the other. Dominance of one social class over others is called 'hegemony'. Since teachers and students in a school belong to one or the other caste or community group, the practices of hegemony are also found in the school environment. This is the reason why only certain students can attend a public school and certain others a government school. Even inside the classroom, certain students receive better attention and treatment while others do not. Hence, every school creates a *political environment for the learner*.

You can infer that the school is a social institution in any country controlled by historical and cultural forces. Can labourers or persons belonging to disadvantaged sections, poor and dispossessed people start or control a formal school is a question, considered very rarely. Who controls the activities of a school is determined by the powerful in the political environment.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) Differentiate between the psychological and the political environments of a school.

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- 2) How is social environment of a school different from its cultural environment?

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10.3.6 Dynamism of School Environment

In the above sections, we have discussed that a school provides a learner in addition to physical environment with unique psychological, social, cultural and political environments. Do these environments in a school exist in isolation from one another? Or is there an interaction among these environments as well? Before answering these questions, you may like to read the following field notes from observations reported on the internet about schools that catered to three villages.

Field Note 1

The explorations in three villages situated in climatically different tracts have brought out several aspects of culture and modalities of child socialization. Arising from human interaction with nature and a time-honoured value system, which transcends the day-to-day subsistence concerns of the rural people, the cultural commitments of the family and community shape the child's personality almost from the moment of birth. However, the local primary school transplanted by the state in this cultural milieu may remain unaware of the education received by the child through participation in various rites, rituals, celebrations, life-style and allocated tasks. It is this education that shapes the child's personality and makes it feel secure within its cultural setting. It knows who it is, what it is expected to do, in what way, and how to relate itself to the kinship structure and the neighbourhood. It learns a tremendous amount about nature and develops emotional bonds with its different seasonal manifestations. All this knowledge, gathered at first hand, infuses self-confidence in the child and forms its cultural identity.

Field Note 2

In the process of growing up the child is helped by the various stakeholders, parents, kin, neighbours and the community as a whole. The school teacher, being an outsider, is not a participant in this process of incidental but fairly well-organised cultural learning. For the rural child, therefore, the teacher in the formal school is a stranger and the school is a place where it has no protection from parents, older siblings, or relations and neighbours. School entry for the child is traumatic, an entry into insecurity, into a world of which the ways are quite different from what the child has experienced in its cultural milieu. This is often the reason for non-enrolment of rural children and of a large dropout rate. Not only the child but the parents also are distanced from the school, since it is only the teacher who is designated by the system to transmit education according to a state-prescribed curriculum. The textbook is the only tool of education, but the standardised, formal language it uses is far removed from the local vernacular. Its lessons deal with subjects with which the child has no cultural familiarity. The so-called co-curricular activities are also prescribed from a 'national' and 'international' standpoint about which the community, parents and children know next to nothing. Local festivals and celebrations receive a small place in the annual list of state-prescribed holidays, but the school does not figure in them as a cultural participant. The parents do not know what the curriculum intends to do nor what the textbook teaches. As a result, this education can receive hardly any support at home. The results of school learning fail to correspond with the parents' expectations of schooling and they withdraw their children from school. The children, by and large, do not regret this withdrawal and happily return to the security of the culture imbibed by them before school entry. This picture was seen in the three villages under investigation. It reinforced the overall research findings in this respect.

Having read the above field notes, what conclusions would you draw about the various components of school environment? Yes, the various components are not like watertight compartments. There would be a constant and continuous interaction among these

environments. The unique environment of a school is the product of a dynamic relationship among the various components and environments.

For example, the personality of a learner can be described in terms of the physical, psychological, social or emotional dimensions. Even though we can study these dimensions separately, personality of the learner is a dynamic organisation of all these dimensions (and more). Similarly, what we call school environment is a dynamic organisation of the physical, psychological, cultural, social and political environments.

Shared power in learning is exercised to control the curriculum, its contents and methods, and the coordination of all learning activities. Education for liberation provides a forum for the imagination and free exercise of control of learners, teachers, and the community, while also providing for the development of those skills and competencies necessary for the exercise of such power.

In text Activity

- 1) Recall the primary school you attended. Make a brief description of the physical, psychological, cultural, social and political environment of it.
- 2) Visit a nearby secondary school. Observe and talk to the students and teachers. Write a field note describing its physical, social and psychological environment.

10.4 CAN SCHOOLS BE CLASSIFIED BASED ON THEIR ENVIRONMENT?

We have discussed so far that schools differ in terms of physical environment. If some schools are run in dilapidated buildings, others in crowded classrooms with poor illumination and ventilation, there are others having spacious buildings with good architecture. For a moment, close your eyes and imagine the physical environment of a government school, a private school and a public school. Do these schools present different pictures to you? Similarly, if you imagine a rural school and an urban school do you see them as having different physical surroundings? If yes, then, it is possible to classify schools on the bases of their physical environment.

We all know that if any single factor makes a difference between a poor school and a successful school, it is the commitment and initiative of the teacher. Teachers do play a crucial role in fulfilling the potential of a village school. However the state of teachers in India is not satisfactory. The rural primary school teacher occupies the lowest position in the hierarchical administrative structure and is expected to bear the burden of education in complete isolation with very little support. The rural teacher in addition to normal teaching is also expected to perform other functions such as census taking, etc., which take time away from teaching. Would this be the same in an urban English medium private school or a public school?

Will the teachers belonging to different types of schools provide their students with similar psychological environment? It is true that in some schools teachers demand discipline and regularity in work from their students, while those in other schools are almost unconcerned? In other words, schools can also be classified according to their psychological, social and political environment.

You would agree that certain kind of physical environment goes with certain kinds of psychological, social, cultural and political environments. A school with a dilapidated building is more likely to practise social segregation, may have greater political interference, may present to the learner poor standards of learning, and may truly adhere to the local culture. Whereas, a well-maintained and spacious school may present to its learners a variety of planned experiences, set higher standards for learning, act as a true critique of cultural practices, and interfere the least with its policies and programmes.

Let us think for a while of the analogy used earlier of the personality of a child. We know that every child has a unique personality. Still we do classify a set of children in categories such as extrovert-introvert, social-inhibited and impulsive-reflective. Children classified as extroverts are not all at the same level of extroversion, nor those classified as social are equally social. We may find them more extroverts than introverts or more social than inhibited. Similarly, even though schools are unique in their environments, we can classify schools into specific categories based on their environment.

10.5 INFLUENCES OF SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT ON THE LEARNER

We will use two anecdotes to discuss the influences of school environment on the learner.

Anecdote I

This anecdote starts with the visit of one Mr. Narayanappa, who came to meet the Headmaster of a government school adopted by a non-governmental agency. Mr. Narayanappa wanted to take his 10 year old son out of the school. His stated reason for seeking to take out the boy was that he was moving to a different part of Bangalore.

As luck would have it, I (the author) happened to be visiting this school on that day and I decided to probe this matter further. With a little coaxing, it became apparent that Mr. N was taking his son out of school for good. When I expressed my concern that he should think about the long-term prospects of his son, Mr. N retorted (respectfully), "Sir, that is exactly why I am taking this step. What sort of future do you think my son will have studying up to the 10th Std in a government school? He may not even be able to get through the examinations in the normal course. If he is lucky, he may manage to score 50-60% at the end, which will be totally inadequate for him to gain admission in a decent college. On the other hand, if I place him with a good 'maistry' (contractor), he will learn a useful trade and earn money for my family. And then with some luck, by the time he is 25, he may even become a small-scale contractor on his own. Worse still, if he continues with his schooling any longer, he may not even be inclined to do manual labor, which I see as essential for him to earn a living."

This anecdote demonstrates a father's apprehension that the school influences the learner, but the influence need not always be positive or as expected.

Study of school influence on the learners in fact has been a concern of researchers in education. They have posed questions such as: 'Does the physical setting; the building and its architecture have any influence on the student achievement?'

Two noteworthy evaluation efforts on this topic are those of Beck (1979) conducted over 120 schools, and of Traub et.al. (1976) over 30 schools. Both studies made an effort to control each school's curricular emphasis, and also distinguished between different types of environments. Both looked at noncognitive as well as cognitive student outcomes. Although noting considerable variations within the school types, the Beck study found that on the average, students in conventional schools significantly outscored the open-plan students on mathematics and reading achievement tests. Noncognitive outcomes such as attitude toward school showed no relationship to the physical setting. In contrast the Traub et.al. evaluation found no consistent relationship between school architecture and achievement outcomes. Moreover, they observed that students in open-plan schools displayed more positive attitudes towards school, their teachers, and themselves, and also rated higher on independence.

You would find it true that a beautiful and clean physical environment may lead to feeling of ownership and attachment among pupils and teachers to the school. However, it is doubtful that the building alone could significantly affect children's test scores. In order to fully understand the impact of the environment, it is important to examine those social and instructional variables that intercede between the architectural shell and educational outcomes. The following anecdote may illustrate this more clearly.

Anecdote 2

I (Mr. X) went to see the Head Master of one of the schools, immediately after my organisation had adopted the school. It was actually my first meeting with the Headmaster and after we exchanged preliminaries, the following exchange transpired:

Mr. X: *What can we do for your school?*

Headmaster: *Sir, how much money does your trust roughly control?*

Mr. X: *Don't worry about the actual money reserves. We have enough to help improve the learning levels of the children in your school. Can you give us some ideas about what you need?*

Headmaster: *To start with, how about getting us _____? (fill in a long list of school items)*

Mr. X: *I don't mind getting you all that you requested and much more! I can promise you the sky.... But, can you assure me that as a result of our efforts, each class will show a 'X' % improvement in their grades.*

Headmaster: *Ahhh, I see.. let me think about it .. I think we need teaching aids like charts and models badly. Can you get us some?*

Mr. X: *No problem, please give me a list.*

(Headmaster hands over a list after some discussions. A day later..)

Mr. X: *Here are all the items you wanted. What next?*

Headmaster: *Sir, we never thought you were going to come back in a day!! Anyway, can you find us at least two more teachers? We have only five teachers for seven classes.*

In sub-section 10.3.2, we discussed psychological environment in a school. How does the psychological environment influence a learner? Probably the psychological environment of a school has the most telling effect on the learner. The expectations of conduct, the reward and punishment mechanisms, the nature of learning engagements, etc. have an influence on the learner.

Imagine a situation in a school where there is incongruity between your image of yourself and your immediate experience of yourself (i.e. between the ideal and the real self).

Imagine that you are in a *threatening situation*. For example, if you have been taught to feel unworthy, if you do not get A's on all your tests, and you aren't really all that great a student, then situations such as tests are going to bring that incongruity to light that tests will be very threatening. When a student is expecting a threatening situation, he/she will experience *anxiety*. Anxiety may lead to specific influences on the learner behaviors such as escaping from tests, blaming the teachers for faulty questions, engaging in malpractice and so on.

Social environment of the school is another factor that influences learner behaviour. The social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communications in a school, (the social environment) influence a learner and his/her learning. Learning can be enhanced

when the learner has an opportunity to interact and collaborate with others on instructional tasks. Learning settings that allow for social interactions, respect diversity, and encourage flexible thinking are socially competent. In interactive and collaborative instructional contexts, individuals have an opportunity for perspective taking and reflective thinking that may lead to higher levels of cognitive, social, and moral development, as well as self-esteem. Quality personal relationships that provide stability, trust, and caring can increase learners' sense of belonging, self-respect and self-acceptance, and provide a positive climate for learning. Positive interpersonal support and instruction in self-motivational strategies can offset factors that interfere with optimal learning such as negative beliefs about competence in a particular subject, high levels of test anxiety, and undue pressure to perform well. Positive learning climates can also help to establish the context for healthier levels of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Such contexts help learners to feel safe to share ideas, to actively participate in the learning process, and to create a learning community.

By taking into account the cultural diversity of students, the school can create its own enriched cultural environment. Learning is most effective when differences in learners' linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds are taken into account. The same basic principles of learning, motivation, and effective instruction apply to all learners. However, differences in language, ethnicity, race, beliefs, and socio-economic status all can influence learning differently. Careful attention to these factors in the instructional setting enhances the possibilities for designing and implementing appropriate learning environments. When learners perceive that individual differences in their abilities, backgrounds, cultures, and experiences are valued, respected, and accommodated in learning tasks and contexts, their levels of motivation and achievement are enhanced.

Teacher Influence



The teacher has important responsibility to create positive physical, social and emotional environment for his/her pupils. He/she determines to a great extent the emotional tone of his/her classroom by own appearance, attitude and methods. He/she helps the shy child to be accepted by the group and helps the aggressive child to utilise his/her energy in constructive projects. He/she adjusts pupils' work to their abilities and strives to arouse interest and enthusiasm in areas of study that he/she considers of vital importance. How wonderful it would be if every teacher made the following pledge to students?

My Pledge to Students *I will greet students each morning with a smile, and will be generous with my smiles throughout the day. I will look for opportunities to reward and praise students for their work and good behaviour. I will not show favouritism, and will try to be fair to all. I will use fair and appropriate methods of discipline. I will try to make classroom instruction as interesting as possible and look for new and diverse ways of presenting materials. I will maintain a positive atmosphere for learning. I will treat my students with respect and will not embarrass them in front of their classmates. I will make myself available and approachable to students. I will recognize the individuality of my students and will provide opportunities for each of them to experience success. I pledge to work toward making this a very successful year for all of us.*

10.5.1 Planned versus Unplanned Influences

We have discussed in the earlier sections that the school has an environment of its own, and the environment of the school has an impact on learners and their development. A school trying to make a positive impact on the learners would have consciously incorporated requisite factors in it. However, all influences of the school environment are not always planned. In other words there are influences of school environment on the learners which are unplanned and probably unintended. Some unplanned influences are embedded in the educational philosophy of the school or the absence of it, yet there are others that result from the unplanned and not well-articulated practices. The following illustrations from classroom may help you to understand the planned and unplanned influences of school environment.

Illustration 1

This teacher is finding it difficult to control the class. The first standard has three sections. The Headmistress is in charge of one section. She is always engaged in the office-related work and hence her class is split and each teacher handles one and a half sections. The teachers shout to get the attention of the children. Children do not listen. Then the teacher asks all of them to stand and wait. Two kids were fighting amongst themselves. The teacher makes them sit near her. The rest of the activities of this class were done with the students standing. The teacher hits the stick on the table to get the kids to listen to her. She repeats that all children should write but many do not do so. The teacher says "I have never seen such children like you".

Illustration 2

According to the register there are 12 children. Seven of them have come today. The last attendance was taken on the 18th of September. The date today is 23rd September. The afternoon class started at 2.20 p.m. The attendance register was filled up and brought forward till the 22nd of this month. The teacher did this during the break time. The teacher seems to be unaware of the date. Today is 23rd and the attendance is marked for the 22nd.

Illustration 3

With respect to punctuality it was observed that a Headmistress is no different from the teachers. She also comes late, goes early or takes leave. When the Headmistress is present in the school she conducts assembly, oversees the lesson notes prepared by teachers, allocates work other than teaching to teachers, supervises arrangements for activities of the school such as meetings of PTA etc., undertakes liaison work with community in improving the school facilities and implementation of incentive schemes such as mid-day meal. It is found that due to her belief that she is an administrator and not an academic, the Headmistress knowingly or unknowingly adversely influences the functioning of the school and learning there in. For example, the class, which is assigned to the Headmistress, is generally found to be either looked after by some other teacher or is involved in rote learning and repetitive activities for a substantial time in the day since they do not require the presence of the teacher. The Headmistress also unwittingly causes interruption in a class involved in learning. She peeps into or engages in talking to teachers in the middle of the class. This is primarily because of her thinking that her spot consultation with a teacher is more important than the learning of children.

The above illustrations, you would agree, have adverse, unplanned and unarticulated influences on the learners. You know that children do not start showing adverse behaviours like telling lies or using abusive language unless such behaviours exist in their environment. Hence, students in a disciplined school will also be disciplined, even

though there is no subject taught called discipline. The requirement then would be to monitor the unplanned influences of a school on the learner and if possible convert some of them into planned influences of schooling. The good schools are found more concerned about such practices.

Some factors are used by instructors to facilitate student development in the desired direction. These are:

- attending to group dynamics;
- promoting a safe environment;
- decentering authority;
- promoting interdependence;
- maximizing potential for co-creativity;
- encouraging diversity of perspectives;
- valuing experiential learning; and
- assisting students in developing support systems.

As you are aware that many teachers expect their students to actively participate in the class activities and particularly in discussion. When this does not happen in a desired manner, they tend to blame students as uninterested or incapable. On the contrary, there may be an unplanned influence on them, which inhibits their participation.

Teachers need to be aware of such unplanned adverse influences and take steps to turn them into positive influences. In situations where the students actively engage in class discussions, you may find the following enabling factors operating for them.

- Students have a clear goal.
- The teacher has high expectations.
- The teacher demands high-level performance.
- Skills are introduced to the students.
- Skills are immediately applied and reinforced after they are learned.
- Students are provided with repeated controlled practice.

Establishing a positive classroom climate enhances academic achievement and helps to promote appropriate classroom behavior. You may find that a teacher in such classrooms tries to ensure the following practices.

- Fostering of a classroom atmosphere of trust, cooperation, empathy and risk taking.
- Model positive attitudes, respectful behaviour, helpful conversation and constructive actions.
- Do not permit ridicule, sarcasm, or superiority to exhibit in classroom.
- Promote healthy relationships and value among all students.
- Give students opportunities to share their experiences and learning with each other.
- Help others to view your students positively and treat them well.
- Use humour.

- Use a variety of instructional strategies and activities to maintain student interest in learning and to accommodate student differences.
- Teach problem solving, conflict resolution and/or social skills.
- Show students how to build on their strengths and compensate for weaknesses.
- Model and teach students to accept and learn from mistakes.
- Emphasize improvement rather than perfection.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) List any five adverse and five positive influences of school environment on the learners.

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10.6 CLASSROOM AS A MINIATURE SOCIETY

The school as a social system is a kind of the human habitat for students. It is created and controlled for the purpose of enabling young children to function effectively in life situations, they must participate in. It provides a system of human interactions in which the participants are oriented to live with their individual rights and obligations. In school, learners are constantly involved in the process of forming and re-forming themselves into social groups- classes, clubs, student councils, athletic teams, and so on- for the purpose of accomplishing the educational tasks assigned to it by the society within which it operates. A network of roles is developed in each of these groups in order to ensure the unity and productiveness of the group. These roles are integrated with one another through values that are developed and commonly held. Over any given period of time, different participants in the system perform different roles. It is through participation in the variety of roles, students develop the knowledge, skills and values the society expects them to acquire as citizens and individuals.

According to Gale E. Jensen, the social system of the school consists of different structures that need to be understood. Let us briefly discuss these structures.

The Formal Work Structure

The main task of the school is to fulfil certain educational needs of the society in which it operates. This is "public" task as the school has been created to enable its participants to attain the level of action or practical competency to deal effectively with the problems and situations they face in their private and public lives. In order to accomplish the assigned public task it brings together the participants and provisions and creates the conditions of learning necessary to acquire the practical competencies by members. The manner in which participants relate to one another and obtain gratifications by performing the functions necessary to achieve the school goals is designated as the formal work structure of the school.

The Authority Structure

Within a social system, decisions that affect its efficiency, productivity, state of equilibrium, and integration need to be made in an ongoing manner. The system thus devises structure to institutionalise the rules and procedures by which vital decisions

are made. The manner in which different groups and individuals in decision-making positions relate to one another and to the other participants is termed the authority structure of the school.

The Communication Structure

The relationships that participants establish with each other and the procedure of reporting to authorities, and the status of their assigned responsibilities within the formal-work structure represent the communication dimension of the school system.

The Power Structure

The ways in which participants of a social system exercise their individual ability to give or withhold satisfaction of other's needs represents the power dimension of the social structure. The school principal may deny a leave request of a teacher. A group of students may upset the work plans for a certain day and block the progress of the class toward commonly recognized goals because they feel the teacher has dealt with them unfairly.

The Status and Privilege Structure

Some members by virtue of the position held in the system are accorded deference, honour, recognition, and material rewards that others do not receive. Students are aware of those eligible to receive rewards primarily because of their position rather than performance or contribution to the work of the class/school. Such examples reflect the prestige and privilege structure.

The Informal Clique Structure

The manner in which the participants of the school relate to share concerns, anxieties and private perceptions, for supporting one another in threatening and uncertain situations, and for taking concerted action toward ensuring their personal welfare, represent the informal-clique of the school structure.

10.7 CLASSROOM CLIMATE

Classroom climate is defined as the *authority pattern and social and emotional relationships within a teaching group*. White and Lippitt categorised classroom climate as *authoritarian, democratic and laissez-faire*. Classroom climates can also be conceptualised on a continua, e.g. *supporting-belittling* (like personality, it may be most consistent style). It relates to styles of teaching and models of leadership (International Dictionary of Education, 1978).

Improving Classroom Climate

How the classroom feels to students, both physically and emotionally, comes under the umbrella of classroom climate. More and more studies show that establishing good classroom climate is essential for learning to take place. A beautifully decorated class with colorful bulletin boards does not necessarily mean that the classroom is a happy place to be. Teachers must do many other things as well, such as the following:

- Have a genuine interest in children. Teachers should greet students as they come into the classroom in the morning. They should make certain that they get to know each child individually (say each student's name). They should use praise and encouragement lavishly.
- Make sure that classroom rules are clearly stated. Teachers should be fair and consistent in enforcing rules.
- Be objective, not judgmental. Teachers should try to see things from different perspectives.

- Show that you are human. Teachers should have a sense of humor and be willing to admit when they are wrong.
- Minimize the power differential in everyday communication. Teachers should not hide behind the desk or a podium; this may send a message that they wish to create a distance between themselves and the students.
- Address problem behavior directly and immediately.
- Actively go after the students' opinions. Teachers should honor student voice.
- Give choices to students. Students should be given opportunities for making choices and decisions and learning how to solve problems. Given the opportunities to make mistakes, eventually students are able to learn through experiences.

Creating caring classroom/school communities also includes creating warmth on a daily basis by doing things such as having morning meetings, teachers sharing their own personal experiences with students, and learning about students' interests. If the teacher makes eye contact, shows open body language, continues to paraphrase in order to check for understanding, and asks probing questions, he or she is continuing to set up an open environment of trust. Giving positive attention and focusing on the students' strengths are as vital as involving parents children's school lives.

And finally, teachers must be consistent, show personal connections to all parts of learning, be willing to share their experiences and, most importantly, be an empathetic person. A teacher who establishes a healthy, learner-centered classroom will find that his/her students have positive self-esteem. The child will feel important, honoured, validated, and self-confident.

Perhaps every teacher at the beginning of the year should keep this as a reminder on his/her desk.

10.7.1 Creating a Positive Classroom Climate

Having known that classroom climate has an influence on student learning and their personality development, it becomes necessary for a teacher to know how to create a positive classroom climate. Let us discuss a few skills that can help a teacher in creating a positive climate.

POSITIVE CLIMATE SKILLS

- Recognize individual differences
- Learn names
- Arrange seating
- Establish expectations
- Make yourself available
- Encourage the students

Sensitivity to Individual Differences

One essential characteristic of effective teaching is to be responsive to the individual needs of students. Students in a class have too many differences for a teacher to be able to teach all the same content at the same time. However, quality teaching entails being sensitive to the individual differences in preferred learning styles by varying the rate, amount, nature or content of the instruction. Teachers who alter instruction to accommodate individual differences send the message that they want to reach to all of their students all the time. Students are much more likely to participate actively in learning activities when they know that their teacher has carefully considered their needs.

Learn Students' Names

Calling students by name signifies a positive relationship between teachers and students. Students who recognize that their teachers think of them as individuals, feel more comfortable in class and are more responsive in discussions.

Create a Safe Environment for Student Participation

Teachers can foster a safe climate in the class by ensuring that they do not ridicule a student's questions or remarks. It takes only one or two instances of "That's a stupid comment. Haven't you prepared for class?" to discourage participation. By doing so a teacher provides a model for students' proper classroom etiquette.

10.8 CURRICULUM AND CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

Curriculum makers, for example, take into account the social demands on the individual as a source of curriculum content. Broadly speaking, curriculum deals with the experiences of the learner both inside and outside the school, as long as they are planned. Curriculum at the school stage, which connotes *the sum total of experiences provided in a school*, are also based on functional areas of living such as family living and other personal relationships, civic responsibility, vocational participation, leisure-time activities and a philosophy of life pertinent to all of these.

As long as teachers insist on forcing curricular material that, from the students' perspective, has no relevance to their lives, education will be an arduous process. It is amazing that a boy who can't remember the number tables can remember decades old cricket statistics or a girl who can't write a coherent paragraph can tell stories that would make anyone proud. If calculus or Shakespeare or any other subjects which we feel children should learn seem difficult to them, it is not because the children are dumb, but because they don't see any reason for learning them. Teachers must get to know their students, because the motivation to learn is "inside" them, in their phenomenal fields and phenomenal selves.

Case A

The marushalas (desert schools) of western Rajasthan exist where there are no other schools. Pioneered by an NGO called the Urmul Trust, this unique alternative desert school is any urban pupil's fantasy. There are no classes in the typical sense of the term. No corporal punishment, no stress-inducing tests. Instead, a relaxed learning environment, where children look forward to coming to school. The marushala follows the agricultural calendar, enabling its students to study as well as contribute to the family's livelihood. At the marushala, students themselves chalk out the study programme. Teachers prepare for the following day's lesson, but these are flexible and can change at the last minute, depending on the students' request, preferences and convenience. This perhaps explains the kids' delight in attending school every day, often coming earlier than the scheduled time.

10.9 ENVIRONMENT IN e-LEARNING

If Marushala provides one context of schooling, we have another context emerging rapidly with the computers and the internet. What kind of environment do these provide to a learner? Are learners capable of dealing with them in the same way as they deal with peers and teachers in a classroom?

Sugata Mitra has a PhD in physics and heads research efforts at New Delhi's NIIT, a fast-growing software and education company with sales of more than

\$200 million and a market cap over \$2 billion. But Mitra's passion is computer-based education, specifically for India's poor. He believes that children, even terribly poor kids with little education, can quickly teach themselves the rudiments of computer literacy. The key, he contends, is for teachers and other adults to give them free rein, so their natural curiosity takes over and they teach themselves. He calls the concept "minimally invasive education."

To test his ideas, Mitra launched what he calls "the hole in the wall experiment." He took a PC linked to a high-speed data connection and imbedded it in a concrete wall next to NIIT's headquarters in the south end of New Delhi. The wall separates the company's grounds from a garbage-strewn empty lot used by the poor as a public bathroom. Mitra simply left the computer on, connected to the Internet, and allowed any passerby to play with it. He monitored activity on the PC using a remote computer and a video camera mounted in a nearby tree.

What he discovered was that the most avid users of the machine were ghetto kids aged 6 to 12, most of whom have only the most rudimentary education and little knowledge of English. Yet within days, the kids had taught themselves to draw on the computer and to browse the Net. Some of the other things they learned, Mitra says, were even more astonishing to him.

What can you infer from the above? You would agree that e-learning can create a unique environment of its own. Students can learn in this environment as much as they learn in a formal face-to-face situation of teaching.

10.10 LET US SUM UP

School is a major influence on an individual. Therefore, the kind of school the child is sent to is an important decision for parents to make. School environment can be defined as that part of the school surrounding with which the child interacts on a regular basis. There are various elements that constitute the surrounding of a learner in a school. Physical environment of schools in India vary from poor-impoverished to rich-affluent. The psychological environment of a school refers to the stimuli that impinge upon the learner's psyche in the school. School has a strategic as well as indispensable role in the development of a healthy personality. The social surrounding of a school constitutes its social environment. Many social skills, habits, attitudes and prejudices of individual students are tried out, tested and refined in the social environment of the school. Culture is the total way of life, the social legacy, an individual acquires from his/her group. Culture is that part of the environment which is totally a creation of humans. Every school has a cultural environment characterised by certain practices. School is a social institution and the members belong to different social classes. Dominance of one social class over the other is common. Such behavioural dynamics are operative among both teachers and students and create a political environment. There is constant and continuous interaction among various components of the school environment. The dynamic relationship among the various components (environments) create the unique environment of a school. The different elements of the school environment can influence the learner positively or adversely. School is a social system and can be considered as a miniature society. School as a social system can be better explained in terms of structures such as formal work structure, authority structure, communication structure, power structure, status and privilege structure, and informal clique structure. Classroom climate is another component of school environment that influences learning. A positive classroom climate creates a conducive environment for the learner. As an example of positive classroom environment, we discussed the case of marushalas in western Rajasthan. Finally, we discussed the significance of e-learning in creating a unique environment for learning through the case of study of "the hole in the wall experiment".

10.11 UNIT END EXERCISES

- 1) Describe the components of school environment with suitable illustrations.
- 2) Explain the influence of school environment on a learner.
- 3) Describe a school having an environment that has positive influence on learners.
- 4) What are the specific features of Marushala and an e-learning group? As a teacher what classroom climate you would like to create and how?

10.12 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

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UNIT 11 ENVIRONMENT AND LEARNING

Structure

- 11.1 Introduction
- 11.2 Objectives
- 11.3 Effects of Environment on Learning
 - 11.3.1 Physical Environment
 - 11.3.2 The Sociocultural Environment
 - 11.3.2.1 Effects of Social Class on Learning
 - 11.3.2.2 Effects of Gender on Schooling
 - 11.3.2.3 Influence of Culture on Learning
- 11.4 Creating Conducive Learning Environment
 - 11.4.1 Classroom Environment
 - 11.4.2 What can a Teacher do?
- 11.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 11.6 Unit End Exercises
- 11.7 References and Suggested Readings

11.1 INTRODUCTION

The environment in which learning takes place influences one's learning in multiple ways and at all levels. In this unit, we are going to discuss the advantages and disadvantages of environment for learning. Children come from homes having different socioeconomic background. They attend schools that have different amounts of physical and learning material resources. The home and school environment together constitute the kind of learning environment a child has/can have. Here first we discuss the physical aspects of learning environment at home and school. We then, briefly describe the effects of the physical environment on the learning of disabled children. There are some social class and culture factors that influence learning and achievement. We also briefly examine the effects of gender on schooling and learning behaviour. Finally we discuss the issue of creating conducive learning environments for all children and the pivotal role teachers are expected to play in it.

11.2 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you should be able to:

- explain the effects of physical environment at home and school on children's learning behaviour and achievement;
- identify and discuss the different factors related to social class that have an impact on learning behaviour and school achievement;
- discuss the effect of gender socialization on learning behaviour;
- discuss the influence of culture on learning; and
- describe the steps a teacher can take to create facilitative learning environment.

11.3 EFFECTS OF ENVIRONMENT ON LEARNING

In unit 8, you have learnt about different kinds of learning environments. In units 9 and 10 we have discussed in detail the various aspects of learning environment in school, home and community. From the earlier three units you might have drawn the inference that while some environment facilitates learning, the others may have adverse or deterrent effect on learning. In this section, we are going to discuss the effects of environment on learning.

11.3.1 Physical Environment

By now, you know that physical environment is one of the important elements that constitute the learning environment. Although learning can take place anywhere, we will centre our discussion around factors related to home and school.

Accessibility and Infrastructure

The establishment of elementary schools within one kilometer radius of habitation has been the goal of our national policy for long. This brings in the significance of physical accessibility to schooling. If the school is not easily accessible to children, it creates the first barrier in the path of learning. Difficulty in accessing school demotivates parents to send their children to school. Even if some parents send their children to far away school, they do have reservations against sending girl children so far away from home. The physical distance between home and school also affects the learners' motivation. In short, we can say that easy physical accessibility to schools is definitely an environmental facilitator of learning. Lack of availability of schools near one's habitation is an environmental disadvantage, in particular, for the girl child's schooling.

Infrastructure facilities available at the school are significant constituents of the total physical environment. If you visit schools in different parts of India, you would notice that there is no uniform pattern of physical facilities available in schools. You may like to recall the examples we discussed in unit 10. Some schools have well built structures with spacious classrooms, science and computer laboratories, and library whereas some schools operate in dilapidated buildings with leaking roofs, or in makeshift structures or under trees. The first category of schools often have play grounds as well as material resources for promoting psychomotor and affective learning. Most of the second category of schools may not have lab, library, toilets or drinking water facilities. Children in these schools are not protected against weather or noise pollution due to lack of proper permanent structures. Many of these schools do not have appropriate teaching-learning aids. Does the level of infrastructure facilities influence students' learning? Govinda and Varghese (1991) conducted a case study of primary schooling in Madhya Pradesh and found that the level of infrastructure facilities provided in the schools played an important role in improving the teaching-learning environment and, consequently, in the learner's achievement level as well as the overall school quality.

Often children in lower middle or working class families have to contribute to the family income or assist the family during seasonal income generation. If the time schedule of the school calendar doesn't match the local community requirements, children are often pulled out of school for assisting or participating in the income generating activities. Many children face such environmental disadvantages that negatively affect their schooling. This can be remedied only if the school timing is in congruence with the needs and context of the local community. In this situation also, it is the girl child who is at the most disadvantaged position of being the first casualty as she is required at home for cooking and taking care of younger siblings while parents are engaged in economic activities. So far, we have discussed the advantages and disadvantages of physical environment for learning. The particular context of

our discussion was school. As you know, home is another agency that exercises significant influence on the child's learning. In what follows, let us examine the physical environment at home and its influence on the learner.

Home Environment

Earlier we stated that there is no uniformity in the facilities available in different schools. It is true even more of the physical environment in the homes of different learners. Some children live in well built houses with proper ventilation and lighting, adequate number of rooms that shield them from outside noise and provide the quietitude needed for learning activities. These homes also have resources like, television, radio, newspapers, books other than textbooks, computer with Internet connectivity and educated family members. In these homes children often have their time structured for different activities like schoolwork, sports, entertainment etc. by the adult members of the family. Children are not expected to waste time in household chores. As the surrounding community also has matching physical environment, interactions with the community add to the resourceful physical environment at home. Such environment facilitates and influence learning. Now contrast this scene with houses that are poorly built with inadequate lighting and ventilation, houses that are crowded due to lack of adequate space where children undertake learning activities in the midst of noise. In such homes children may not have additional resources like books, newspaper or computer. The family members may not be adequately educated to assist the child's learning activities. The child may be expected to pitch in with the household chores too. The physical environment may be yet again different in other homes. For example, children may be living in makeshift houses where even basic minimum resources like textbooks may not be available. These children may be pulled out of school every now and then by parents as and when they need them at home. No particular learning time is allotted to these children at home. And parents being illiterates can't assist the child's learning activity. Such physical environment at home fails to positively influence the child's learning. A facilitative physical environment is a requirement for creating a facilitative learning environment.

Till now we were discussing physical environment at school and home and its influence on learning in the context of regular children. By regular children we mean, children who are considered to have normal mental and physical ability. Let us now discuss the influence of physical environment on learning in the context of children with disability.

Disability and Physical Environment

Children may encounter physical as well as mental disabilities. Disabled children may not find schools in their locality catering to their special needs. Added to this problem is the attitude of the society that considers disability as deficit and not difference. When there is attitudinal deficiency, a viable physical environment of learning for the disabled is a far cry. Before we examine the advantages and disadvantages of the physical environment for learning of the disabled, let us take an overview of the different areas of disability and the provisions available through legislations. The Rehabilitation Council of India Act, 1992 was the first legislation to have dealt with disability. Two other legislations followed; the Persons With Disabilities (equal opportunities, protection of rights and full participation) Act, 1995, and the National Trust for Welfare of Persons with Autism, Cerebral Palsy, Mental Retardation and Multiple Disabilities Act 1999 and Rules 2000. In these three acts, the following areas of disabilities are identified and defined:

- blindness
- low vision
- leprosy cured
- hearing impairment

- locomotor disability
- mental retardation
- mental illness
- autism

Definitions of terms:

- **Blindness** refers to a condition where a person suffers from any of the following conditions, namely:
 - total absence of light; or
 - visual acuity not exceeding 6/60 or 20/200 in the better eye with correcting lenses; or
 - limitation of the field of vision subtending an angle of 20 degree or worse.
- Person with **low vision** means a person with impairment of visual functioning even after treatment or standard refractive correction but who uses or is potentially capable of using vision for the planning or execution of a task with appropriate assisting device.
- **Leprosy cured** person means any person who has been cured of leprosy but is suffering from:
 - Loss of sensation in hands or feet as well as loss of sensation and paresis in the eye and eye-lid but with no manifest deformity;
 - Manifest deformity and paresis but having sufficient mobility in hands and feet to enable them to engage in normal economic activity;
 - Extreme physical deformity as well as advanced age which prevents them from undertaking any gainful occupation.
- **Hearing impairment** means loss of sixty decibels or more in the better ear in the conversational range of frequencies.
- **Locomotor disability** means disability of the bones, joints or muscles leading to substantial restriction of the movement of the limbs or any form of cerebral palsy.
- **Cerebral palsy** means a group of non-progressive conditions of a person characterized by abnormal motor control posture resulting from brain insult or injuries occurring in the pre-natal, peri-natal or infant period of development.
- **Mental retardation** means a condition of arrested or incomplete development of mind of a person which is specially characterized by subnormality of intelligence.
- **Mental illness** means any mental disorder other than mental retardation.
- **Autism** means a condition of uneven skill development primarily affecting the communication and social abilities of a person, marked by repetitive and ritualistic behaviour.

Let us now examine some of the educational provisions specified in the PWD Act, 1995.

The appropriate governments and local authorities shall:

- ensure that every child with a disability has access to free education in an appropriate environment till he/she attains the age of eighteen years;

- endeavour to promote the integration of students with disabilities in the normal schools;
- promote setting up of special schools in government and private sector for those in need of special education in such a manner that children with disabilities living in any part of the country have access to such schools;
- set up adequate number of teachers' training institutions and assist the national institutes and other voluntary organizations to develop teachers' training programmes specializing in disabilities so that requisite trained manpower is available for special schools and integrated schools for children with disabilities;
- make provisions for transport facilities to the children with disabilities or the alternative financial incentives to parents or guardians to enable their children with disabilities to attend schools;
- make provisions for the removal of architectural barriers from schools, colleges or other institutions imparting vocational and professional training; and
- make provisions for the supply of books, uniforms and other materials to children with disabilities attending schools.

The provisions as envisaged in various Acts are meant to create appropriate environment for the education of the disabled. However, reality continues to be quite different. For the disabled children (especially those with locomotor disability) and their parents it is a difficult task to commute between school and home. In most schools, the building structure is not modified to facilitate the mobility of the disabled child. For example, a child on wheel chair or on crutches has limited access to the different parts of the school building. The physical environment in the school is often unfriendly with no ramps or even proper toilet facilities. Using public transport between school and home is an almost impossible task as public transport system like any other public service in the country is the least disabled friendly. Disabled children who study in mainstream schools are at a disadvantage as most of the physical environment in a classroom is designed keeping in mind the non-disabled child. For example, a child with low vision may find the lighting in the classroom and the distance between the seat and the visual presentation as a handicap even if the teacher has taken care to seat the child in the best place possible. The child's inability to do certain things (disabilities) is compounded by the limitations imposed by the society (handicap). Some disabled children need personal attention for their mobility or safety. If their parents cannot afford such service either by themselves or by hiring, they are not sent to schools. Therefore, in the case of disabled children non-accessibility to school is more profound than among able children. Non-availability or non-affordability of aids such as hearing aids or braille books is another environmental disadvantage that hinder the learning of the disabled. A physical environment that is disabled friendly both at home and in the school is a primary requirement for creating an appropriate learning environment for the disabled.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) Describe the physical environment in your school. Discuss those environmental factors that facilitate learning.

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- 2) Choose two students, one a high achiever and the other a low achiever. Analyse the home environment factors of these two children. What could be the factors that influence their performance? How can you enhance the performance of the low achiever?

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- 3) Describe the advantages and disadvantages in the physical environment of your school for the inclusion of the disabled.

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11.3.2 The Sociocultural Environment

In unit 8, we have discussed the dynamics of sociocultural environment in a school system. We discussed the idea of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1973), a system of deeply internalized values which determine attitudes towards educational institutions and thus school behaviour and the level of educational attainment. In this section we will further discuss the influence of sociocultural environment on learning.

11.3.2.1 Effects of Social Class on Learning

As we pointed out in unit 8 and in the previous section of this unit, learners belong to different socioeconomic status (SES) families. There are many factors that are taken as indicative of one's social class or standing in a society. Indicators like annual income, occupation/profession and level of education are commonly used to describe the concept of socioeconomic status. The influence of social class on the behaviour is more observable in urban than in the rural areas. While caste and language are strong identifying and rallying factors in rural areas, social class is a determining factor of behaviour in urban areas. For example, in a place like Delhi, the members of working-class families from different parts of India may have more in common than members of an upper-middle or middle class family and those of a working-class family belonging to the same region, caste or speaking the same language. In spite of the caste reality in rural areas, it is the social class that influences behaviour such as, which school you send your children to or the kind of experiences you expose your children to.

How do differences in social class influence learning and performance in school? Let us examine the issue by looking at the advantages and disadvantages of different environments on learning.

It is found that illiteracy is highest among the low-SES. It is also true that drop-out rate is very high among the low income groups. Researches conducted in elementary schools in India have pointed out many causes for the drop-out phenomena, some of which are:

- poor financial conditions of the family;
- illiteracy of parents;
- parental ignorance of the value of education and priority of household work for girls;
- difficulty in finding a bridegroom for a literate girl;

- coeducational system; and
- non-availability of lady teachers.

Studies conducted in other countries have also indicated the relationship between SES and school performance. For example, it is found that high-SES students of all ethnic groups in the United States show higher levels of achievement on test scores than low-SES students (Alwin & Thornton, 1984; Goleman, 1988; White, 1982). In spite of the well established positive relationship between low achievement and low-SES, it is observed sometimes that children from low-SES perform well in school. This is an indication of other factors operating along with income, education and occupation of parents that may have an effect on the child's learning. Some possible explanations of the effects of low-SES and low school achievement are: living conditions; family environment; child rearing styles; low self-esteem; learned helplessness; resistance in culture, and tracking/streaming (Snowman & Biehler, 2006; Garcia, 1991).

Living Conditions

There are wide variations in income among Indian families. Many low-SES groups live in poverty and do not receive adequate primary health care. We have observed earlier that research findings show poor financial conditions of the family as a major reason for children dropping out of primary schools. Most school-going children from low-SES families suffer from under and malnourishment that adversely affect their growth and development. Due to unhealthy living conditions, lack of proper diet and inadequate primary health care, many low-SES children suffer from variety of illnesses compared to the middle-class children. The housing conditions in which most low-SES students live do not create a proper physical environment for learning. We have discussed this point in detail in unit 8 and earlier in this unit. While middle class children get private study space at home, low-SES children often live in makeshift arrangements and crowded houses with absolutely no private space.

Family Environment

One of the reasons cited for dropout in primary school has been parental illiteracy and ignorance of the value of education. In contrast to this, middle-class families attach high value to their children's education. Middle class parents support their children's education in many ways. Most middle class parents are school or college educated, therefore, they are able to provide academic support to their children. Formal education is rare among low-SES parents, therefore, their ability to participate in the child's academic activity is very limited. Middle class parents provide their children with additional resources (such as, additional books, newspaper, computer etc.) to enhance their school achievement. They expose their children to wider variety of stimuli/experiences, such as taking them to a science exhibition and making it a meaningful learning experience by attending to their queries, and by describing and discussing the displays. Such guided learning experiences make it easy for the child to deal with school learning and become interested in lateral learning. A child who doesn't receive such stimuli would often be at a disadvantage when placed together with children who have had those experiences. Middle class family seems to provide mediated learning environment as advocated by Vygotsky in the children's zone of proximal development. Studies have shown that middle class mothers talk more; give more verbal guidance; help their children to understand the causes of events, make plans, and anticipate consequences; direct their children's attention to the relevant details of a problem, and rather than imposing solutions they encourage children to solve problems themselves (Hess & Shipman, 1965; L. Hoffman, 1984; Willerman, 1979). Differences in interaction styles of parents may explain some of the differences among children from different social classes. However, one cannot prejudge the kind of learning environments based on income or social status. There are low-SES parents who value education and attempt to provide rich learning environments for their children. In fact the actual behaviours of the parents are more predictive of their children's school performance than income level or parents' occupation (White, 1982).

Children who come from a rich learning environment get a head start in school. They easily interact with the teachers. These children mostly belong to the middle and upper middle class. Low-SES students usually do not have the advantage of rich learning environment. They also do not have the material advantages like the middle class children. Due to lack of varied experiences and differences in child rearing styles, children from low-SES families may find the classroom environment intimidating and, therefore, remain passive. This passive behaviour may be construed by the teacher and the peer group as lack of ability owing to the disadvantaged and deprived environment of the student. Therefore, the teacher starts with low expectations of the child from the deprived background. Since the teacher presumes that the child is not intelligent, the teacher may not include him/her in the classroom interactions to avoid embarrassing situations for the child. Through such teacher behaviour children come to believe that they are not good at school work (Elrich, 1994). Low expectations of teacher set in low self-esteem in children which adversely affect their school achievement.

Learned Helplessness

Due to any factor or a combination of factors discussed so far, low-SES children may show low achievement and may repeatedly fail in schoolwork. Overtime they may develop a sense of learned helplessness (Seligman, 1975), an expectation of failure, based on previous experiences with the belief that nothing can be done to succeed and all efforts will be futile. They may come to believe that doing well in school is a difficult task. Such belief may be reinforced if they have not experienced success at home (family members, relatives or friends doing well in school and completing school), and eventually drop out of school and think of it as normal.

Resistance Cultures

Peer group influences may affect the performance of socially and educationally disadvantaged students. The following narrative by an African American female student describes the peer group attitude towards students who do not share their academic values.

I'm a member from Amherst, Massachusetts, and it is predominantly White. ... I'm able to get along with the White kids, but it's the Black kids that I find I have a hard time relating to. ... In class, they're always thinking, "There goes that girl, trying to be smart, trying to act White." It seems like I can't relate to them, and I'm Black myself. How is that supposed to make me feel? I'm trying to fit in both worlds, and it's like I have no place (Ash, 2000, p.6).

The Black students, who accuse the female Black student of 'acting White', are members of resistance culture that is characterized by group values that refuse to adopt the behaviours and attitudes of the majority or dominant culture. Some researchers have suggested that low-SES students may subscribe to resistance culture to maintain their identity and status within the group. Resistance culture is demonstrated by rejecting behaviours that would make them successful in school - studying, cooperating with teachers, even coming to class (Bennet, 1995; Ogbu, 1987; Willis, 1976).

Tracking/Streaming

Earlier we discussed the effects of teachers' low expectations on the low-SES learners' self-esteem and school achievement. Such teacher behaviour which continue throughout their schooling, create a different academic environment for many low-SES students.

If teachers track them into low-ability, they are not given challenging tasks. Teachers prepare and encourage high achievers to take up academic streams that are considered tough and challenging. If teachers have low expectations of low-SES students, they are taught differently from the beginning that maintains their low-achievement status and get pushed into inconsequential streams of study. It is worth noting the comments of a Latino male student from Evanston, USA:

A white student is considered to be an honors student unless proven otherwise, and a student of color is a 'regular' student unless he proves himself to be 'honors'. When I was in sixth grade, they put me in ESL because of my Mexican accent, and since then I've had to prove myself to every teacher, every year, even in my A.P. classes, that I actually belong in that class... sometimes you just get tired of it (Ash, 2000, p.7).

Studies conducted on the social effects of streaming found close correlation between social class and stream. Streaming created pupil subcultures; lower stream boys (largely from working-class backgrounds) created anti-school, anti-academic attitude as they were labeled by the school as failures; they placed high value on behaviour which teachers considered as indiscipline; in contrast, top-stream students behaviour conformed to the academic norms and values of the school (Hargreaves, 1967; Lacey, 1970).

Check Your Progress 2

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

1. Describe the profile of low achievers in your class. Identify the possible social class factors that contribute to their low achievement.

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2. Do you have students with low self-esteem? Is it a result of your low expectation behaviour? Describe steps to remedy the situation.

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11.3.2.2 Effects of Gender on Schooling

Free primary school education is a Constitutional provision in India. We also know that in spite of this, rate of illiteracy in India is very high. In fact female illiteracy is much higher than male illiteracy. There are many reasons for higher illiteracy among women. Boys and girls are socialized differently in most societies. From the beginning girls are reared and trained to play a subservient / inferior role in life. Research has shown that drop out rate is high among girls. While poor economic condition of the family is a major reason for most children dropping out of school, there are gender specific factors that increase the drop out rate among girls we have discussed earlier. The following four are the gender specific reasons.

- Non availability of lady teachers;
- Priority of household work for girl;

- Coeducational schools;
- Difficulty in finding a bridegroom for a literate girl.

The reasons cited here reflect the attitude of the parents that is rooted in the social construction of gender differences. So, from the beginning, the girl child is at a disadvantage and socialized to underplay abilities that are related to schoolwork. Therefore, if there are limited resources to be spent on education, then the preference is given to boys' education. Thus boys and girls are socialized early into behaving differently.

Do children experience gender bias in school? Do teachers treat boys and girls differently? Do boys and girls differ in their ability? Is difference due to biological predispositions or socialization in early years of life? Does gender bias affect the students' learning? Let us examine these issues.

Studies have shown that there are gender differences in cognitive abilities. In some areas girls outscore boys and on other tests boys do better than girls. Boys seem to do better in spatial ability and mathematical reasoning while girls perform better on verbal ability and memory tests. Why these differences in cognition exist, no one knows for sure.

Teachers demonstrate different behaviours towards boys and girls. For example, in a classroom, most teachers seem to tolerate the boisterous behaviour of boys while they remind the girls to follow decorum. It is often observed that boys are punished more severely than girls. Is there any particular educational reason for the teacher to behave differently with boys and girls? If not, it means that the teacher behaviour is gender biased. Such teacher behaviour is probably the result of their own gender socialization. Most people are gender socialized to view girls as better behaved and boys as aggressive, hence the differential treatment. How does gender bias affect the school performance and career choice of students? Gender conditioning in schools reinforces the idea that certain type of subject and course is more appropriate for one sex than the other. If the student's self-concept is based on stereotyped gender roles, the choice of the course will reflect this. It is observed that home science courses are seldom chosen by boys. On the contrary, most girls will be encouraged by teachers to take up home science courses, suggesting that they need these skills as women are expected to run the home. Effects of gender conditioning is reflected in classroom interactions. Girls who strongly conform to the stereotypical female role find it difficult to express their thoughts before male classmates. This may seriously affect their participation in classroom activities. We have already mentioned the reluctance of parents to send girls to coeducation schools and schools without lady teachers.

11.3.2.3 Influence of Culture on Learning

In Unit 2, we have discussed cognitive development theories of Piaget and Vygotsky. Piaget was criticized for overlooking the effects of sociocultural environment on cognitive development. The stages of cognitive development observed by Piaget are not necessarily "natural" for all children because to some extent they reflect the expectations and activities of the children's culture (Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995). Vygotsky's theories of cognitive development suggest that our cognition is a function of both social and cultural forces. People use psychological tools (language, signs, symbols etc.) to master the functions of perception, memory, attention and so on. Each culture has its own set of psychological tools and situations in which these tools are appropriated (Kozulin, 2003). In a monocultural environment the effect of culture on learning may not be visible as the psychological tools used are common and appropriated in common situations. However, this has implications for multicultural classroom situations, as children growing up in different cultures use different cognitive devices and procedures to understand the world around them.

Cross-cultural studies of children demonstrate the effects of the child's culture and social group on learning. For example, children of pottery-making families in one area of Mexico learn conservation of substance earlier than their peers in families who do not make pottery (Ashton, 1978). Classification is a basic concrete operation children learn early in life. If you are given a group of objects like, plate, knife, apple, grape, cucumber, and potato and asked to create groups, you would probably put plate and knife in one group, apple and grapes in another group, and cucumber and potato in a third group under the labels utensil, fruits, vegetables respectively. Will people from another culture classify these objects into the same group as you did? Couldn't these objects be grouped as plate, knife and fruits together? Yes, they can be grouped in different ways. Studies have shown that even basic operations like classification may not be so basic to people of another culture. For example, when African Kpelle people were asked to sort 20 objects, they created groups that made sense to them- a hoe with a potato, a knife with an orange. This was not how the experimenter expected the objects to be classified. Therefore, the experimenter tried to get the Kpelle people to change their categories. But they insisted this is how a wise man would do it. So the experimenter asked, "Well how would a fool do it?" The Kpelle people promptly created the categories the experimenter had expected- food, tools, and so on (Rogoff & Morelli, 1989). This example demonstrates that the experimenter's and the Kpelle's idea of the basic operation classification is different from the other. The experimenter and the Kpelle think and act differently because that is what is required of them in their cultural system (such as school, home, community).

Language is one of the psychological/cultural tools that has a profound effect on classroom learning. Lee (2003) who has conducted a longitudinal study of cultural modeling (that explicitly links deep disciplinary knowledge and funds of knowledge of students, especially students of colour, students who speak language other than academic English, students from the periphery) on speakers of African American Vernacular English argues that:

... the knowledge and concepts and strategies that AAVE speakers use in their everyday talk are largely tacit. Because this knowledge is tacit, when confronted with analogous problems in school-based literature classes, the students do not draw on relevant schemata to attack problems of interpretation that share meaningful attributes with the kinds of language interpretation and production in which they engage outside school (p.397).

People learn many basic operations without going to school or any other formal setting of learning. Weavers who create intricate designs of ikat, pochampalli, and Kanjeevaram saris and such other clothes in multiple colour combination learn those skills from their sociocultural settings. Weaving skill involves concepts of math, physics, chemistry etc. (for example, dimensions of design involves calculation, dyeing of cloth requires the knowledge of thermodynamics and chemicals). Another example is the mathematical ability displayed by children (who may not have been to school) who sell objects on the street.

The various examples cited during the discussion suggest that culture influences learning and people from different cultures may respond differently to similar situation. Different cultures teach different social behaviour to children. For example, cultures that prize cooperation and sharing teach these skills early, whereas cultures that encourage competition nurture these abilities in their children. In a multicultural classroom, depending on the cultural orientation of the child and the classroom culture, the child experiences the classroom environment as conducive for learning or not.

Check Your Progress 3

Note: Write your answers in the space given below.

- 1) Identify the behaviour by which you reinforce gender conditioning among your students.

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- 2) Identify curriculum areas that interfere with learning acquired through cultural tools. Describe steps to modify curriculum transaction to accommodate the cultural knowledge of your students.

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11.4 CREATING CONDUCTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

We have discussed so far different kinds of environment and their effects on learning. We have learnt that while some environment offers many advantages for learning, others may have some disadvantages that affect learning adversely. Is it possible to change the environmental disadvantage to advantage? It is true that teachers cannot change the socioeconomic status of the students, their family environment or make substantial difference to their physical well being. But they can still do a great deal to create a positive, conducive learning environment in the classroom for all children. What kind of a classroom environment is conducive for learning?

11.4.1 Classroom Environment

Throughout this block we have emphasized the point that the school environment has two aspects, the physical and the sociocultural. Classroom environment also has two aspects: the physical and the sociocultural.

Physical Climate

The question may arise whether teachers can make any difference to the physical environment of a classroom. It is true that teachers cannot change anything about the physical environment that includes the classroom building and the furnishings. But there is another dimension to the physical environment that can be created by the teacher in a classroom. It must be stated here that better physical environment does not guarantee higher academic achievement, but it would definitely create a facilitative environment for learning. Research does not provide conclusive evidence that the physical features of a classroom affect actual achievement. It does suggest that the physical features including the classroom's spatial arrangement affect student attitudes and behaviour (Weinstein, 1979). Another study suggests that the physical arrangement can influence the teacher's behaviour, which in turn influences the student's learning (Arlin, 1979).

While there are certain aspects of the classroom's physical environment that cannot be changed by the teacher, there are some aspects that impact the learning climate and can be controlled and created by the teacher. Let us discuss how a teacher can create a positive physical climate for learning.

There are minimum amount of material resources needed for the teaching-learning activity in the classroom. For example, a teacher must ensure that things like chalks, charts, models and equipments needed for demonstration etc. are available. How these materials are used and presented to the learners determine whether the learning environment is facilitative or not. Accessibility to the resource materials should be ensured for all learners by the teacher. Teaching-learning activities conducted in the classroom should be visible and audible to all learners. To achieve the goals of accessibility, visibility and audibility, the teacher must look into the spatial arrangement of the classroom.

Disability

Children with disability may need special attention regarding the spatial arrangements you create for them in the classroom. For example, a student with low vision will need to be seated close to where the teacher conducts the activities and there is proper light. A student with hearing impairment should be placed at an angle where he/she can easily observe the lip movements and actions of the teacher. Children with locomotor disability may also need special spatial arrangement in the classroom. You would agree that the physical aspects are by and large teacher oriented and not difficult to achieve.

Sociocultural Climate

We have already discussed at length the impact of socio-cultural environment on learning and achievement. In unit 8, we have used terms like Pygmalion effect, self-fulfilling prophecy and teacher behaviour to underscore how teacher expectations affect students' performance. Let us now discuss how teachers can create a conducive sociocultural environment for learning. A research study shows that teachers indeed can make a positive difference to children who are environmentally disadvantaged. The study was conducted among urban low-SES African American students in grades 3 through 5. The study found that students who liked school the most and found their classroom experiences to be the most satisfying described their relationship with their teacher as caring and supportive one. Supportive teachers showed an interest in students by talking to them about their personal problems and providing emotional support (Baker, 1999). Other researches have shown that high levels of achievement for low-SES students are associated with the following attitudes and approaches among teachers:

- Teachers' high but realistic expectations for their students
- Mastery goals
- Never accepting low-quality work
- The use of scaffolded instruction (Denbo, 2002; Rolon, 2002/2003).

11.4.2 What can a Teacher do?

What can a teacher do to create a conducive learning environment? Let us consider the following points.

Resist labelling of students

Often we act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes which have no rational base. Teachers should not prejudge students' ability based on their culture and social class. Teachers should understand and manifest in their behaviour that cultural difference is not cultural deficit. It would be a good idea if teachers audit themselves to identify their sociocultural biases and prejudices. After identifying the sociocultural biases, the teacher must make conscious efforts to guard against them. The teacher should also dissuade the dominant sociocultural peer group in the school from such biased practices.

Disability is not handicap

Do not approach disabled learners with a prejudged notion of deficiency. Disability per se is not a handicap, it becomes a handicap when society does not create a favourable environment. Therefore, teachers must create an inclusive environment in the classroom for the disabled.

High expectations and realistic goals

Teachers must have high expectations of all students and set realistic and achievable goals for individual students.

Using instructional techniques to suit each learner

Teachers should use a variety of instructional techniques to include the different sociocultural characteristics of learners that influence their learning. Use instructional strategies and techniques to suit the learning needs of the disabled and children with learning disability. Select instructional methods (peer tutoring, cooperative learning, mastery learning etc.) to include different learning styles.

Understanding the sociolinguistics

Lack of understanding of the sociolinguistics of students by the teacher may lead to misunderstanding and communication break down in the classroom. Classroom communication is based on its own set of rules such as when, how, to whom, and in what manner to use language. When the sociolinguistic skills of students do not meet the expectations of the teacher it creates a barrier to communication. Therefore, knowledge of the sociolinguistic skills of students will help the teacher understand why the communication breaks down.

We have discussed some points regarding how to create a conducive learning environment. In brief, we can say, for creating a conducive or positive environment the teacher must respect his/her students, know his/her students and organize learning experiences for them to meet high expectations and achieve realistic goals.

11.5 LET US SUM UP

There are different kinds of learning environment. Each learning environment is characterized by its physical and sociocultural aspects. In this unit, we tried to understand the effects of different kinds of environment on learning and school achievement. We did it by examining the different aspects of learning environments. Lack of easy accessibility to school is a deterrent force in creating a proper physical climate for learning. Schools that have appropriate infrastructure facility create a positive physical climate for learning. A resourceful physical environment at home enhances school achievement. Children from low-SES families are at a disadvantage due to the poor learning resources at home compared to the middle-class and high-SES children. Non-supportive physical environment at home and school has adverse impact on the academic achievement of the disabled. We, then, discussed the effects of sociocultural environment on learning and school achievement. Poor financial condition of the family is a major cause for children dropping out of school. Other possible explanations of the effects of low-SES and low school achievement can be found in factors like; living conditions; family environment; child rearing styles; low self-esteem; learned helplessness; resistance culture, and tracking/streaming. The socially constructed idea of gender has its effects on schooling. Boys and girls are early socialized into behaving differently. In many Indian families, early on girls are reared and trained to play a subservient role in life. Gender conditioning in schools reinforces the idea that certain subjects and courses are more appropriate for one sex than the other. Next we described the effects of culture on learning. Cross-cultural studies on children have shown that the child's culture and social group influence his/her learning. Therefore, people from

11.6 UNIT END EXERCISES

- 1) Observe a classroom and describe the features that impede and promote learning.
- 2) Describe the social environment of your classroom. Identify the social class factors that influence the learning behaviour of your students.
- 3) What measures would you take to minimize the impact of teacher related factors(eg. Low expectation, tracking/streaming) on your students' learning behaviour?
- 4) Describe the instructional strategies and techniques you would choose to teach a particular topic to students who subscribe to different learning styles.

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