TUTOR

Introduction to Inclusive Education

Strand Three: Systems & Structures

Contents

Introduction

Welcome to the Systems and Structures unit, which examines how society is made up, how it functions, and its impact on the barriers and enablers to equitable, inclusive education for everyone. We identify how society creates systems and structures, their functions, and why they oppress certain types of people.

This unit combines face-to-face learning with guided self-study activities. You will learn to identify and analyse social systems and structures in your society, community, and field of education. You will learn how these systems and structures are embedded and reinforced in the curriculum and classroom, and even in your initial teacher training. Reflecting on the social systems and structures that are in play in education can help you to understand and resist some of the cultural norms and values we, as a society, and as educators, have come to hold and re-enact.

Various learning materials and methods are available for you to explore the topic in depth and apply it in practice. These will help you to analyse, reflect on and further develop systemic relationships in the field of education:

- **Required reading:** Indicated in the reading lists and on the Learning Platform.

- **Infographics and frameworks:** System diagrams that provide a structured overview of the relationships between different elements in the education system and illustrate their interactions.

- **Reflective activities:** Analyse barriers and opportunities for inclusion, if possible, based on the experiences from your own practice.

0.2.1 Societal systems, structures, institutions, and how they impact on education.

To better understand the world around us, we need to recognize what type of society we are living in. How this society functions; what systems and institutions it has set up and maintained; how these systems and structures work; how they interact with each other; and what impact they have on us - both individually and collectively.

A sound understanding of these interactions and inter-relationships helps us to analyse our own profession, professional environment, and our professional training and practice more consciously and to shape it in a targeted manner. We will therefore start by looking at the differences between systems and structures and how they influence each other. We will then look at systems theory, which serves as a transdisciplinary approach to understanding complex interrelationships holistically and initiating effective change processes.

What are systems and structures? How do they differ?

When we talk about systems and structures, we refer to societal systems, structures, institutions, and inter-relationships. We are examining society with a sociological lens in mind.

Society

Society is a collective of individuals with shared cultural, (most times) geographical, and social ties with agreed laws, values, and beliefs. Currently in the West (or Global North), we live within what could be described as a capitalist, hierarchical, combination of industrial and post-industrial society, depending on the country and context.

Structures

A society builds structures to function. Societal structures revolve around institutions, ownership and access to resources, and proximity to power. They include the legal system, the family, the government, the economy, religion, and education. The institutions within society have a role to play in maintaining the social structure. They have agreed functions, standardised ways of operating or functioning, and are inter-related to each other. They are built and maintained in a way to keep the status quo in place – i.e., to keep society functioning as it always has.

Examples of structures are:

- **Organizational structures**: In schools or companies, there are hierarchies and responsibilities that control decision-making processes. A well-organized structure improves communication and efficiency.

- **Physical structures**: The architecture of schools, cities or public spaces influence people's behaviour - e.g. the layout of classrooms or break areas.

- **Conceptual structures**: Theories or frameworks for understanding the world can also be viewed as structures, such as "truisms" e.g., democracy, meritocracy.

Key features of structures are:

- **Stability:** Structures bring continuity and predictability but can be too rigid and hinder change.

- **Organization:** Structures ensure processes, distributions, and access to power through hierarchies.

Systems

A system is more than just a collection of parts - it is a dynamic, organized entity that serves a specific purpose. The interactions within a system can be linear or non-linear, predictable, or chaotic, which adds to its complexity. Therefore, it is not enough to look at individual components of a system in isolation - rather, the interactions and processes within the system as a whole must be analysed.

A social system is made up of the interactions and relationships between groups of people within a society. They construct and agree a shared language, laws, culture, values system, beliefs structure and agreed 'norms' of a society. The social norms then become the dominant values of that society. Their interactions are very patterned, and diverse types or groups of people understand and engage in different patterns of behaviour depending on the positions they hold within their society.

A key feature of systems are interrelationships. No part of a system can be viewed in isolation - changes at one point influence the entire system.

Differences between systems and structures

Systems are dynamic entities that consist of interacting processes and players. They are constantly in motion and adapt to new conditions. Structures, on the other hand, are more stable and form the framework within which systems operate. They provide orientation and continuity but can be changed or adapted if the requirements of a system or its environmental conditions change. While systems can be actively shaped, structures determine how flexible or resilient these adaptations are.

Interactions and effects

The components of any system interact with each other in complex ways. These **internal interactions** determine how efficient, compact, and responsive the system can be. In addition, systems interact with other structures in the environment. These **external interactions** can influence the behaviour of a system or change its structure, leading to changes in overall performance. Changes can and do occur within societal systems and structures, but they tend to be slow, minimal, keeping the status quo of power in check as much as possible.

Many systems contain **feedback loops** that influence interactions within the system. There are two basic types: positive feedback loops, which reinforce and accelerate changes, and negative feedback loops, which have a stabilizing effect and keep the system in balance.

Examples of feedback loops:

- Social media – algorithms create an echo chamber or confirmation bias
- Documentaries and national media – listening to lived experiences e.g. "In her shoes campaign" for the repeal the 8th movement, and the stories of inequality spoken about on national radio shows during marriage equality referendum in Ireland
- Road Safety Laws – keeping the roads safe and punishing those who make it dangerous

For your learning journal:

- Is *meritocracy* – the belief that if you work hard, you will get a college place, a decent job, and have a good life – a feedback loop in society or is it a value?

Feminist and educationalist, bell hooks, describes an integrated system which interacts, or works together, to keep society functioning in ways which keep certain groups of people in power and oppresses others as an "**Imperialist White Supremacist Heteropatriarchy**" (2004). This reflects the roles or normalisation (and even pervasiveness) of capitalism, racism, sexism, ablism, and heteronormativity in contemporary society. She was referring specifically to the U.S. context in her work, but it is generally accepted by scholars to be the same of the Anglo-Euro-American world (i.e., the West or Global North). This system of capitalism, racism, sexism, ablism, and homophobia is integrated into the norms of everyday life for anyone growing up, living, and being educated in *the West*. It is so subtle, its feedback loops pervade storybooks, cartoons, movies, literature, songs, advertising, food – everything we consume.

We consume the norms, values, and beliefs of our society from birth. We learn the rules for how to behave, who deserves, who is trustworthy; we learn the rules of how to survive and win. One of the biggest feedback loops for this integrated system of oppression is 'niceness.' We are taught from an early age we must be nice. We must not make a fuss. We must be pleasant - particularly disabled people, young girls, Black people, non-conforming people, minoritised people as unpleasant or **non-conforming** behaviours and a perceived lack of social 'niceties' can indicate a *problem in the system*. We learn this through books, magazines, tv shows, lessons, posters, school uniforms, school rules, codes of conduct, obedience, stillness, silence.

What feedback loops are places of learning are reinforcing when they say/require:

- "Bossy, talkative girls" / "he will be running the country someday"
- Full, clean uniforms, with dress shoes, and crested jumpers/coats/tracksuits
- Angry, aggressive Black girls versus "boys will be boys" or "that's just boy's joking"
- Attendance certificates / penalised for lack of attendance
- Penmanship certificates / penalised for perceived messy handwriting
- Dress code conforming haircuts – no hair dye, piercings, tattoos, and makeup
- Skirts for "girls" and trousers for "boys"
- No oils, perfumes, strong scents
- "*That parent* is in again/*that parent* is never here!"
- Sit down and sit still for lessons / exams
- Kept in from yard or PE as punishment
- Punished for slang or non-conforming language

hooks argues that even those that are oppressed through this interaction of systems uphold it simply because of they are born into it, raised, and educated within the social norms and values of the society which oppresses them:

> *"We are often seduced, in one way or the other, into continued allegiance to systems of domination—imperialism, sexism, racism, classism. It has always puzzled me that women and men who spend a lifetime working to resist and oppose one form of domination can be systematically supporting another".*
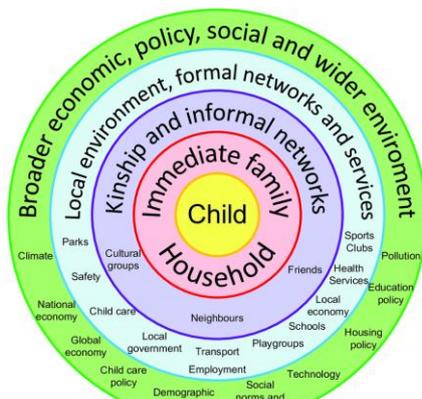
(hooks, 1994, 299).

What hooks describes above can be described as internalised biases. A lot of burden falls on students from migrant or ethnic minority backgrounds to play the role of "the good migrant" or "the good Traveller" and so on. It falls on them to conform and internalise how to play the societal game to succeed and to abide by societal "rules" however non-spoken, oftentimes at the expense of their mental health and well-being.

Systems theory as a transdisciplinary approach

Systems theory offers a transdisciplinary framework for understanding complex systems and their interactions. Its central principle is that the individual elements of a system cannot be viewed in isolation, but rather are part of a holistic context. Instead of focusing on individual components, systems theory analyses the relationships, processes and feedback between the elements and their influence on the system as a whole.

Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who originally developed the theory in biology, is considered the creator of **general systems theory**. Today, however, it is used in numerous disciplines, including engineering, sociology, psychology, economics, and environmental sciences. Its versatility makes it a valuable approach for the interdisciplinary analysis of complex challenges and the development of sustainable solutions.

In **education,** systems theory can be used to analyse the interplay between different elements, such as curriculum design, student behaviour/communications, and institutional policies. Through a systemic perspective, interactions between these factors can be identified and targeted interventions can be developed, for example, to improve student academic performance and well-being by adapting the environment into one that fosters growth and acceptance.

[Bronfenbrenners-ecological-model-Diagram-by-Joel-Gibbs-based-on-Bronfenbrenners-1979.png (850×836)](#)

An important systemic approach in education is the **Bio-ecological systems theory developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner**. This theory examines how different environmental systems – the person's own biological make-up, the family, their school, the relationships between each of those systems, their community and society in general, as well as the time they are living in - influence that individual's development. It helps to look at educational processes not only in isolation at school level, but also to include relationships, and external factors that shape students' learning and behaviour.

Reflection and application questions

The following questions invite you to think about the interactions between systems and structures and to reflect on their significance for education:

1. How do systems differ from structures, and why is this distinction relevant for understanding educational processes for inclusion?

2. What interactions exist within a system and between a system and its environment, and how do they influence its ability to change, to oppress, or to liberate?

3. To what extent are individual perspectives developed by the systems and structures in which they grew up?

References

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Recommended Reading:

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Recommended Watching:

bell hooks and Laverne Cox in a Public Dialogue at the New School, online video recording, YouTube, 13 October 2014
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9oMmZIJijgY

0.2.2 Identification of systems and structures in the educational environment

This unit examines the organizational systems and structures of teaching and learning processes and how they shape pedagogical practices, educator-student relationships and experiences of inclusion or oppression. It also examines the hidden curriculum and how it is shaped by societal systems, structures, (inter)relationships, and feedback loops. By consciously engaging with these elements, educators can gain a deeper understanding of their influence on teaching and on what influences them. By reflecting on and specifically analysing existing systems, structures, relationships, and feedback loops, they open up opportunities to make the teaching and learning process more effective, holistic, and inclusive.

Systems and structures in the educators' environment

Education systems:

Most educators are integrated into the **education system**, a multi-layered system that includes strategic planning, administration, economic conditions, curricula, and state requirements through their initial teacher education training. Others, particularly in adult education, Further Education and Training (FET), and lecturing, tend to come from industry or through a formal or informal apprenticeship / mentoring system and do an additional teaching and learning or adult pedagogy qualification. Both ways of integrating into the education system can help reinforce existing structures and feedback loops.

Recognising the disparity between the diversity of students and the diversity of educators that work with them should cause pause for thought. What might be your 'normal' may not be theirs. **This is called the hidden curriculum.** This disparity lessens slightly in FET or adult education; however, it is still a pause for thought. What sort of feedback loops is it creating? What assumptions, beliefs, and stereotypes do you bring with you into the classroom?

> **The Hidden Curriculum:**
>
> **The hidden curriculum are the norms, values, beliefs, and 'truths' that taught indirectly to students in an educational environment. Many of the norms and values of a hidden curriculum are systems that are meant to uphold the oppression of marginalised groups and protect the powerful groups positionality to power.**

Just like the social media feedback loop discussed in unit one, can the initial teacher education institution and process of work placement be an echo chamber, or a cause for confirmation bias? If you are in the staffroom with other educators who are the same demographic as yourself, had the same economic upbringing, the same cultural upbringing – does that allow room for ruptures in your ideas of 'normal'? If you are training to be an English teacher who has to do the book 'Of Mice and Men' by John Steinbeck with your students because it is on the Junior cycle curriculum, do you resist the book that uses a racial slur? Do you see it as a choice to re-oppress and re-enforce racial oppression in your classroom or do you see it as a classic novel to be covered because it is on the State curriculum? Do you have a choice? Do you see the opportunity to have a choice?

> *Demographics & Diversity: Educators and Students in Ireland*
>
> *"While between 10 and 40 percent of pupils attending post-primary school are non-Irish (CSO 2016), 94 percent of entrants to the post-primary teaching profession identified as Irish (Darmody and Smyth 2016). Entrants to ITE [Initial Teacher Education] have many common characteristics. They tend to be high academic achievers, female, aged 18–22 and from middle class backgrounds (Drudy et al. 2005; Clarke 2009;Keane and Heinz 2015; Darmody and Smyth 2016). Calls to attract under-represented groups, especially males, those from low socio-economic groups, and ethnic minorities, have been made by the OECD (2005, 2010, 2019) and the Teaching Council (2010)."*
>
> (Quirke-Bolt & Purcell, 2021, p. 494)
>
> *"Recent figures from the agency illustrate an increasingly diverse learner population (Solas, 2021a). This data reveals that almost half of the c.150,000 learners enrolled are 35-64+ years of age, a fifth are unemployed, approximately 10,000 have reported having a disability, over a quarter report attaining a lower secondary education or below at the time of enrolment, and they represent c.200 nationalities (Solas, 2021a, Solas, 2021b).*
>
> (Melon & Archer, 2024, p 2-3)

A **professional development system** which combines face-to-face training with digital learning support to provide educators with flexible and accessible professional development opportunities can be one system which could offer the space to truly reflect and change. Through workshops, seminars and mentoring programs, educators could be given the opportunity to reflect on current challenges, learn pedagogical skills and new teaching trends that embrace inclusive education. These diverse formats can help to reduce barriers to access by considering different learning needs and time availability. However, if they do not provide space, time, and opportunity to be confronted with information that disrupts the norms and beliefs of training and working in an educational environment with colleagues just like themselves the positive feedback loop will continue to reinforce norms and truisms.

Organizational structures and systems:

As in most organizations, the education system also has a **hierarchical structure** in which responsibility and decision-making powers are distributed at various levels. Starting with the country's government and department of education who sets the State curricula, quality assurance processes, educator qualification attainment levels, regulations, pay and employment conditions, funding for students' education or lack thereof, inspection and finally support and mentorship systems. A lot of what is decided upon at this level comes down to the country's economic position, political leanings or needs, and the positionality and societal values, assumptions, beliefs, and held norms of the people who are making these decisions. Consider what norms are reinforced when there is a lack of diversity amongst the decision makers!

Within an educational institution, an organisational structure would include the **leadership roles, pastoral roles, educators, and a combination of two or all three**. Each of these levels plays a key role in the organization of everyday school life and influences both the pedagogical orientation of educators, and the learning conditions of the students. Involvement of a parent/guardian association groups or student council should not be discounted in terms of interrupting or reinforcing the beliefs systems and structures already in place depending on the demographic make-up and their own positionality to power. Good coordination and clear communication between the hierarchical levels is necessary for a more equitable, inclusive education environment.

Educators who take part in **networks and professional communities**, both within their educational institution and beyond can be afforded the space to recognise and challenge or reinforce and re-oppress depending on the space that is created and who is in it.

Systems and structures in the learners'/students' environment

Students are also integrated into a complex network of learning environments, social systems and support structures that influence their academic, social, and personal development and their feelings of inclusion or oppression. These systems shape how they learn, interact with their peers, and receive support**.** They also shape how safe students feel and if they can be their authentic selves in the learning environment.

> **Consider:**
>
> **You are a student who has had to change your name to a name that can be pronounced, understood, or sounds like a name of someone within a culture that is not yours. You do this for their comfort and to ease your discomfort every time they mispronounce or shorten your real name. How valued do you feel as a person in this environment? What is the impact on your identity?**

Learning environments:

The **spatial and organizational design of the classroom** has a considerable influence on students' experiences of inclusion. Aspects such as the ability to move, equitable and comfortable seating arrangements, permitted technologies, resources and books which look like them or their communities and families, music that reflects their cultures, languages that reflect their family lives, comfortable clothes, the ability to leave if the class overwhelms them without having to ask for permission, the ability to be silent if they wish, timetables and length of classes, and inclusive classroom management strategies play an important role in students' ability to engage. Educators can specifically navigate these factors and discuss them with students to create an equitable, inclusive learning environment.

The **curriculum** forms the framework that determines what content, and skills students should acquire at a certain grade level. It is often based on state or national educational standards and ensures uniform and targeted knowledge transfer, which was discussed above. Educators are guided by this framework but can adapt their teaching methods to the needs and learning requirements of their students. Curricula set out different learning goals – rarely do they state only one type of book or resource. Choices are made that educators can make with students such as how to meet the learning goals and objectives. Choices are made as to how the materials are presented. These choices are made by existing norms, truths, beliefs, and value systems.

Social systems:

Students are part of **social networks among their peers**, which are made up of classmates, friends, or work colleagues. These relationships have an impact on their academic performance, behaviour, and emotional well-being. Educators can promote positive group dynamics and a supportive classroom climate by strengthening inclusion and recognizing conflicts early on, however they have less of an impact on how peers, friends, colleagues, or family affect the student's level of inclusion.

The **family** plays a central role in the learning process and the personal development of students. Factors such as support in everyday school life, parental or partner commitment, and expectations of performance have a direct influence on educational success and feelings of inclusion. Good cooperation and understanding between school and home can strengthen students' motivation and self-confidence at school when they are young. Education institutions that can provide childcare, or support with caring duties, places to breastfeed, have counsellors to support abusive situations, homelessness, addiction, or relief from food poverty can make the difference when it comes to recognising barriers, trying to eliminate them, and providing real inclusion.

Interactions and effects on teaching and learning

The interaction between educators, students and external systems has a considerable influence on the quality of educational processes. Consciously shaping these interactions can make learning more effective, more tailored, and more inclusive.

Collaborative systems are created through the coordinated collaboration of educators, professionals, institutional structures, and external resources to best support student inclusion. This close coordination is particularly important for creating personalized learning experiences.

However, as already mentioned, educational processes are not only shaped by direct interactions in the classroom or interactions between teachers and students, but also by external factors, such as school administration and their support in resource management and curriculum design, community resources that provide supplementary learning opportunities or guidance services, or educational policy frameworks that define teaching methods and learning standards. These **external structures** have a far-reaching impact on learning

outcomes by providing Educators with access to professional development, support programs and expert advice. Educators who actively develop and engage external expertise are better able to meet the individual needs of their students and create an inclusive, motivating learning environment.

Systemic barriers and opportunities:

Despite support systems, there are often challenges that can affect inclusion in practice. Limited resources, such as a lack of funding or staff shortages, can mean that the necessary materials or support services are not available to a sufficient extent. Rigid structures within the education system also make flexibility and innovation more difficult, meaning that innovative approaches or individual adaptations can often only be implemented to a limited extent. A lack of communication between educators, students, and other educational institutions can also lead to misunderstandings and inadequate coordination, which makes inclusion more difficult. To create an equal and supportive learning environment, it is crucial to recognize these barriers and work towards removing them in a targeted manner.

Reflection and application questions

These questions should help you to reflect more consciously on your own position in the education system and to develop solutions for an effective and sustainable design of your lessons.

1. What role do hierarchies and decision-making structures play at your workplace, and how do they influence the way you teach and work towards inclusion?

2. To what extent do existing structures facilitate or hinder access to individual support and equitable education?

3. Can you think of any practices that are 'run of the mill' but when you unpack them, they become a system that reinforces oppressive practices?

4. What systemic barriers have you already experienced in your school environment? What strategies could help to break these down or make existing structures more inclusive and flexible?

Recommended Watching:

Denise Chaila, the Zambian-born, Limerick rapper, singer, poet, and one of the stand-out stars of the Irish music scene in 2020 performs her single, "Chaila".

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aocxkkgS6_8

See here for the lyrics: https://genius.com/Denise-chaila-chaila-lyrics

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