Non-Formal Education: Is It Relevant or Obsolete?

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Introduction

The importance of non-formal education in the Pacific Region cannot be overemphasized. This presentation argues that it is very relevant and contributes significantly to national developments and in its flexible approaches, seen as a means of addressing some of the pertinent global issues facing the nations in the Pacific Islands. As global issues affect the people culturally, socially, economically and politically, the role of non-formal education becomes very critical in how these issues are addressed. The role of non-formal approaches to adult learning, gender equality, health, sustainable environment and peace and conflict resolution are being widely advocated by both government and non-government organizations in the Pacific Island nations.

Broadly conceived, non-formal education is not a new concept but an educative process that has been in existence in pre-literate societies. Increasing evidence exists to substantiate the claim that non-formal education is an old concept with a new name. In the Pacific Island nations non-formal education is integrated in the life style of the people. This article first examines non-formal education in the traditional context, and then discusses the reasons for NFE in the region, its conceptualization, and its contribution to the needs in the Pacific Region.

Education in the Pacific Traditional Context

Non-formal education was practiced in many Pacific Island nations before schooling became institutionalized. The transmission of knowledge, skills and attitudes to the young is an important activity for the sustainability of many these Pacific societies Thus, in many traditional societies, the young learned the knowledge and skills for economic and social survival in a very organized way.Children and youths learn the roles ands responsibilities expected of their gender and specific tribe. The experienced and recognized community members are the teachers.

Learning and teaching was community-based and was through imitation, observation and on-the-job experience. Although the method and strategy of what was learned was limited and confined, it was suited to the communal way of life, the resources available and their ability to meet extended and community needs. Learning/teaching was an important process as it ensured continuity and sustainability of community life.

During the early day of Christianity, there were non-formal education classes in literacy, agriculture and home economics and hygiene. But such courses were taken over by formal education and the traditional forms of structured learning were no longer valued, although they continue to affect social and cultural life in the rural communities. Formal education was seen to be more prestigious as it led to **"white-collar jobs"** mainly in the modern sector of society.

Formal education will continue to contribute an important role in the preparation of a literate and educated human resource for the modern economy. However, it has to be accepted that FE cannot and will not be able to meet the aspirations of school leavers and other learners who have missed out through the formal education system.

Why Non-Formal Education – Is it Relevant?

In 1960's and 1970's NFE was perceived to offer **'second chance education'** to those who had been **'pushed out'** from the formal system. Various governments have established vocational education programmes to train youths in relevant skills. In Fiji, the multi-craft programmes was established to train school leavers to acquire self-employment skills to generate their livelihood.

While some of the projects produced favourable outcomes, many programmes were not successful because parents did not support the concept and perceived it be **'second class'** to FE. They preferred their children to acquire academic education to prepare them for 'white-collar' jobs in the formal sector (Sharma, 1989).

However, it was recognised that the rapid technological and social changes demanded continuing education and re-training in different knowledge and skills for those in modern employments and in the rural community. Formal education has always acquired most of the educational resources. In recognition of the need for access to new skills and knowledge by those who have missed out on schooling has led to the establishment of a number of education and training programmes for adults and youths by both government and non-government organizations. Required resources were allocated but still minimum compared with FE resources.

There is a greater awareness and acknowledgement of the need for non-formal education in the Pacific Island nations and the role it contributes to nation building. For example in Fiji, an estimated 14,000 young people enter the labour market every year, but only about 8,000 find jobs or further training. Many young people require openings to develop skills and to enable them to earn their living. Many island governments with the support of outside funding have established skill training institutions and also conduct, short training courses for employable skills. For example in the Solomon Islands there are vocational centres set up in provinces to offer courses to youths and school leavers.

The Conceptualisation of Non-Formal Education

Broadly viewed, non-formal education is not a new concept. Increasing evidence exists that it is an old concept with a new name. Non-formal education as a concept can be viewed into three perspectives. There is substantial evidence to support that NFE as concept has been discussed and implemented in various contexts. Three perspectives which are as follows:

    i)   NFE as a Process
    ii)   NFE as a System
    iii) NFE as Setting

In discussing each concept, its practical applications are provided to support and affirm the line of argument of its relevance.

Non-Form Education as a Concept

Non-formal education as a term has caused a considerable discussion. It is a very encompassing term and there has never been any agreed definition. UNESCO (1980) stated that the term is comprehensive and includes community education and youths. Other literature have also expressed the same sentiments that NFE usage has not been consistent because other terms similar in meaning are used inter changeably. However, it is not the intention of this paper to get bogged down in the argument of its definition but acknowledge that it is a term that has been discussed in various international, regional and national workshops, seminars and meetings because of its importance and value. Khawaja and Brennan (1990:5) argue that NFE is not a term limited to developing nations, it is conceptionalised as a result of the failure of the established education system to fulfill the roles which has been prescribed for that system, but they also assert that it is also an international movement which manifests itself in different ways in different nations because of cultural and historical factors.

Non-Formal Education as a System

Following Khawaja and Brennans assertion that NFE has been conceptualized in relation to the limitation of formal education system to meet the learning needs of the majority, NFE has often been perceived as a system, compared and contrasted to the known system of 'formal education'.

NFE as a system was contrasted with formal education under 5 themes. According to Fordham (1980) the five themes are: Purpose, Timing, Contents, Delivery and control.

FORMAL	NON FORMAL
Purposes Long-term and general Credential-based	Short-term and specific Non-credential-based
Timing Long cycle Preparatory Full-time	Short cycle Recurrent Part-time
Content Input-centred and standardized Academic Clientele determined by entry requirements	Output-centred and individualized Practical Entry requirements determined by clientele
Delivery System Institution-based Isolated (from the socio-economic Environment and from social action) Rigidly structured Teacher-centred Resource-intensive	Environment based Community-related Flexibly structured Learner-centred Resource-saving
Control External Hierarchical	Self-governing Democratic

As it can be viewed from the table that NFE is the opposite of FE. NFE can fulfill a range of educational purposes which FE may have failed to address. According to Simkins (1977) NFE is seen as a cheaper alternative to provide individuals with the skills required by the economic system, whenever the formal system has failed to do this. In many countries in the developing nations, including Fiji, the related problems of school leavers and unemployment have led to the expansion of NFE training programmes. For example youth skill training programmes offered by the Ministry of Youth in various rural communities in Fiji has tried to offer employable skills for livelihood for youths.

NFE is also used for remedial purposes where FE has been unable to educate all its citizens and illiteracy is a problem. For example in the Asia-Pacific region, NFE is used to support the universalisation of primary education (UPE) and literacy programs. This has been used to help children to complete primary education and/or to ensure that whatever is learned is not lost, but reinforced (UNESCO, 1987).

NFE is also used for functional literacy to enhance skills and competence in job-related activities. This upskilling and capacity building is a reality in many Pacific island nations. Knowledge is expanding exponentially and new skills are required to handle the use of new technologies and information so that there is improved performance.

As articulated by Evans (1983), NFE is seen to meet the needs of people – and may offer them the opportunity to learn productive skills and to participate effectively in the development of their societies. It can assist the rural communities in their social and economic growth and development. For example in my village through NFE many community projects have been achieved. For example community members have been able to meet together discuss their needs and planned projects which are water, electricity and farming.

NFE as a Process

In NFE as a process, the central focus is on learning and active participation. Several writers have strongly supported NFE as a process and the emphasis on 'participation' and control (Fagan, 1969, Freire, 1972, Thompson, 1981, Gelphi, 1985, Bagnall, 1989, Kedrayate, 1996, 1997, Veramu, 1997).

Bagnall in distinguishing the forms of participation and control argues that depending on the level of participation and control participants have in the programme – it can range from mere presence with no control to full active participation and control. Control is perceived as the highest form of participation. In Fiji for example in most NFE programme there is a conscious effort to ensure that community members participate and have full control of programmes. However most government projects/programmes are continually centrally planned and thus there is little flexibility in encouraging community members to be fully involved.

NFE as a process emphasizes moving from dependency to full control and this is perceived as a fundamental focus in NFE leading to self-learning and empowerment.

The achievement of control should come about with the participants actively influencing the decision-making process and planning of the programmes. NFE as a process emphasizes the active participation of the learning in the decision making and planning of their NFE education programmes (Kedrayate, 1997:38).

NFE as a Setting

NFE as a setting acknowledges the importance and value of an informal climate in NFE activities. It highlights flexibility and informality of learning because most if not all the participants are always adults. Therefore people who facilitate programmes and projects must know how to teach adults and also be well versed with adults' methods and teaching/learning processes.

The use of flexible, less structural methods of learning which include traditional or indigenous learning processes, methods, strategies and techniques are encouraged. These methods include singing and dancing, ceremonials, games, on the job experience, apprentice model, model demonstration, etc. These methods have been used successfully by many non-formal educators in their programmes.

NFE and the way forward

In many Pacific Island nations the economic, political and social and cultural relationships have gone through extensive transformation. This is further aggravated by the effects of globilisation. The perception of nationalism, ethnicity and religious supremacy has created tensions and encouraged conflicts and divisions. This is where NFE can contribute. Steps can be taken to encourage activities, which foster greater multi-cultural understanding and tolerance. There is a multiplicity of learning needs and problems in the community and I believe Pacific community educators and workers require being more proactive to meet them.

The use of local school as one of the learning centres for cultural and educational activities should be encouraged and facilitated for children and adults. This challenge has now being taken up by some Head teachers, for example the Head teacher at Naboro Primary School has initiated a regular adult education classes for parents and community members on various issues which include parents role in education, health issues and communication skills. Some non-governmental organizations like the Fiji Girl Guides Association are using schools and working with health officials to conduct HIV/Aids workshops for girls, parents and teachers. The workshops have been very well attended and successful.

Other institutions can be used such as the Health centres and other Learning centres to conduct programmes in non-formal, adult and continuing education. Some University of the South Pacific centers in the Pacifc Region and schools are already involved in NFE and adult outreach programmes to the youths and community members. But what is required is a more co-ordinated approach and collaboration with other providers so that resources may be shared minimizing overlapping and duplication and thus ensuring more efficiency.

Another issue that is being currently discussed is the environment. For the last two decades, many issues have impacted the physical, educational and socio-economic environments of Pacific Island countries. There is a great need to educate the adult community on building sustainable environments for future generations. While some efforts are being done by governments and non-government organizations to address the issues, the need for continued dialogue and education about the role of the community in the preservation of the environment is critical. Non-formal education, thus in its flexible approach as a process can be used in the facilitation of some of these environmental issues for the community.

Conclusion

It is once more reiterated the importance of non-formal education in the Pacific. It is very relevant and contributes significantly to the development of nation building in most countries in the Pacific Region. With some of the evidence presented here on the function of NFE, it is definitely relevant and not obsolete.

NFE was practiced in traditional societies and popularised in the 1960's because of the failure of the FE system to address all the learning needs of society. As it can be seen from the discussion on the concept of NFE and its three perspectives that NFE has definitely a role to contribute in terms of its purpose as a system, its process and its methods and setting. As a system it can fulfill several purposes thus addressing the deficiencies of formal education and complementing as well as supplementing it, thus addressing the diverse learning needs of society whether it is for social maintenance or social change.

As a process, it encourages the learners/participants to take control of their learning and be independent - not to rely on outsiders. The empowerment and liberation of the learners is an important element in this process.

The cultural and social context of learning is an important consideration in NFE. That is why as a setting, NFE emphasizes the importance of an informal and flexible learning situation where learning strategies are contextualized to the social and cultural situation. With the supportive evidence of NFE in its three perspectives and its practical application – it is definitely a REALITY and offers a lot of potential for Pacific Island nations.

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