

THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF NON-FORMAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

In this paper it is argued that non-formal education has been evident in Fiji and other Pacific Island nations but has not been adequately conceptualised. As non-formal education has emerged as an international phenomenon (Khawaja and Brennan, 1990), an examination of some concepts of non-formal education was made to determine a general concept of non-formal education which would be relevant for the Pacific island nations. However, the importance of the localised nature of the ways in which a specific concept of non-formal education would develop is recognised. In examining the concept of non-formal education, various definitions, purposes and perspectives that have been developed in relation to the concept are examined.

Definitions

It has been claimed that there are problems associated with conceptualising non-formal education because of the diverse uses of the term 'non-formal education' (Grandstaff, 1979; Khawaja and Brennan, 1990) and the lack of agreement about the precise nature of the concept. The problem is further compounded when other terms in the educational literature are used as alternatives.

In the Asia-Pacific Region, the term 'non-formal education' is currently used to refer to several inter-related concepts, including adult education, continuing education, lifelong education, recurrent education and community education. However, the usage has rarely been consistent, causing some confusion among practitioners, planners and theoreticians (UNESCO, 1987). A research finding of UNESCO in 1980 was that:

There is considerable diversity in the use of the terms referring to the education of adults within the region. Moreover, the terms used and the meanings attached to

them are changing ..., reflecting change in actual policy, priorities and programmes. The term 'non-formal education' has recently been adopted in several countries and can be used in more than one sense. (p.43)

For example, in Indonesia, 'non-formal education' is used in a very comprehensive way to include community education and apprenticeships for youths. In Bangladesh, the term 'non-formal education' is used for supplementary second chance education for youths and adults and the term 'adult education' for literacy and post literacy programmes for adults. In New Zealand the Task Force for Lifelong Learning defined 'non-formal education' as occurring in a variety of settings, it differs from informal learning in that it is initiated by members of the community perceiving a learning need. (UNESCO, 1987:45).

While acknowledging the diversity in the use of the term 'non-formal education', some attempts have been made to develop a better understanding of the concept by examining it in the light of other education systems. For example, Coombs and Ahmed (1974) have clarified the differences between informal, formal and non-formal education, as follows:

Informal Education refers to a lifelong process by means of which the individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge through day to day experience, educational influences and the resources of his or her environment, that is, from family and neighbours, from the market place, the library and the mass media.

Formal Education refers to the hierarchically structured and chronologically organised education system extending from primary school to university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialised programmes and full-time technical and vocational training institutions.

Non-Formal Education is any organised, systematic educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular sub-groups in the population,

adults as well as children.

This approach has revealed the similarities and the differences in the three types of education.

Informal education, as noted by Coombs and Ahmed, has some similarities with the traditional education which was undertaken in Fiji and other Pacific Islands before the advent of formal education.

Non-formal education and informal education both operate outside the framework of the formal system. Although the term 'non-formal' tends to suggest informality and is sometimes used interchangeably with the term 'informal' the negative of formal, 'non-formal education' appears to be education that is organised and systematic. However, the difference is that, while formal education is rigid and is characterised by uniformity, non-formal education is flexible in terms of the timing, and duration of learning, the age groups of learners, and the content and methodology of instruction. Non-formal education is not confined to those persons who are dropouts from the schooling system or women who are illiterate, but to any sub-groups in the community who may have specific needs. Thus non-formal education is broad in character, extensive in coverage and diverse in content, methods and participants.

While there is diversity in the definitions of non-formal education, for the purpose of this article, non-formal education is taken as organised, systematic and deliberately planned education to meet specific purposes for particular participants whether they be adults or children.

Non-Formal Education - Purposes

Non-formal education has also been conceptualised in terms of its purposes. Non-formal education may fulfil a range of educational purposes. One purpose is in relation to the formal system. In Simkin's (1977:23) view, because of the failure of formal education to provide skills, knowledge and attitudes at an acceptable cost, non-formal education is seen as a means of providing a cheaper alternative to provide individuals with the skills required by the economic system

whenever the formal system has failed to do this. The related problems of school leavers and unemployment have led to the expansion of non-formal education training programmes. For example, the Zambian Government made efforts to reduce unemployment through providing skill-training programmes (Alexander, 1983:20). However, non-formal education's purpose is not confined to the development of skills for employment as it is broader in scope and more extensive in coverage. Non-formal education has been used for remedial purposes, where the formal education system has been unable to satisfactorily educate all its citizens, and illiteracy is a problem. For example, in the Asia-Pacific Region, non-formal education is used to support the universalisation of primary education (UPE) and literacy programmes, and has been used to help children to complete primary education and/or to ensure that whatever is learned in primary schools is not lost, but reinforced (UNESCO, 1987). Serious as the literacy problem is in many countries in the Region, non-formal education is not confined to creating a literate population or maintaining a level of literacy. The need to ensure that neo-literates do not lapse into illiteracy, has led to non-formal education being used for functional literacy to enhance skills and competence in job-related activities.

Non-formal education is seen to meet the needs of people. According to Evans (1983 272), non-formal education may offer them the opportunity to learn productive skills and a way to participate effectively in the development of their societies. When combined with other inputs, rural non-formal education may be a strong accelerating factor in the economic and social growth of rural areas.

Another purpose of non-formal education is as a means to achieve the goal of lifelong education. The concept of lifelong education, is best realised through non-formal education, as it provides better possibilities to fulfil people's needs (Pena-Borrero, 1984) than formal education.

Through non-formal education everyone is seen as having the opportunity for purposeful learning to keep abreast of technical change not only to fulfil their role in society but also for self-fulfilment and self-development throughout their lifespan. According to Pena-Borrero

(1984:2), whether the purpose of non-formal education is for social maintenance or social change depends on the objectives and strategies for non-formal education and the way facilitators and learners perceive themselves, either as active members of a changing society or as 'helpless products' of the established system. Reed (1987) argues that non-formal education cannot be neutral and that in terms of its purpose it is used either to maintain society or to change it.

Non-formal education is not confined to a single purpose, but encompasses diverse goals and objectives. In the context of this article non-formal education can be seen as a means either to maintain society or change it in relation to the specific socio-cultural groups in which it operates.

Three Perspectives on Non-Formal Education

Non-formal education has also been conceptualised according to three perspectives. These three perspectives are of non-formal education as a system, non-formal education as a process and non-formal education as a setting. They are examined below to broaden the discussion of the general concept of non-formal education.

(a) Non-Formal Education as a System

The first perspective is non-formal education as a system. As the emergence of non-formal education has often been associated with problems within the formal educational system, non-formal education has been explained as a system with a particular relationship to the formal education system. According to Khawaja and Brennan (1990), the approach is of value as it provides some understanding of the new system of non-formal education from the known system, the formal system to the less well-known, the non-formal education system. However, the difficulty may occur for those who have experience of the formal system in terms of internalising its assumptions, so that a change of view to understand adequately the special features of non-formal education may prove difficult.

Fordham (1980:152) has contrasted non-formal education with the formal system using five themes and a diagrammatic representation of his work is reproduced below.

Comparison of Formal and Non-Formal Education - of Fordham (1980)

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 standardised Academic Clientele determined by entry requirements	Output-centred and individualised 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

Fordham's description has clearly brought out the differences between formal and non-formal education as systems. Fordham argues that non-formal education is the direct opposite of the formal system. Fordham's explanation of non-formal education by reference to the formal means is a quantum leap. One may say that what Fordham is describing is the ideal non-formal education system. Those who are already familiar with the formal system such as educational administrators, may be able to better understand non-formal education through this comparison.

However, this may not apply to others who may be less familiar with the formal system. Therefore, other emphases may be required for a better understanding of non-formal education.

(b) Non-Formal Education As A Process

The second perspective is that of non-formal education as a process. The concept of non-formal education as a process centres on learning as its central component. Coombs et al. (1973) suggest that the learner-centred view of education emphasises the importance of beginning the analysis with the participants and their needs before considering alternative means of meeting these needs.

The importance of non-formal education as a process is supported by several writers whose emphasis is on participation and control (Fagan, 1969; Freire, 1972; Thompson, 1981; Gelphi, 1985). Participation as described by Bagnall (1989) is a continuum operating from no more than mere presence at an activity to full control of learning through several stages of active involvement. Presence implies only that the learner is attending the programme. The interests of the learners are not necessarily taken into account. The learners may be entirely passive. Involvement is when the learners, either on an individual or group basis, interact with other learners or the facilitator in a non-formal education programme. Control is the degree of learners' control of the content, aims, objectives and the outcome of the non-formal education programme. Control is perceived as the highest form of participation and this can be genuine. In contrast, involvement may be a subtle form of social maintenance. For example, in some developing countries such as Fiji, where programmes are centrally planned and government has a high profile, it is often difficult for community members to assert their wishes and rights over government priorities (Baba, 1992:8). When this occurs, participation in development programmes becomes a subtle form of social maintenance.

It is certain that those who are dependent are not in control of their own lives. Movement from dependency to control is perceived as a fundamental element in non-formal education leading to capacities of

self-learning and self-realisation (Dave, Ouane, Sutton, 1989:403). To achieve control Axian (cited in Barikor, 1985) noted that participants have to participate and influence the decision-making process and planning of programmes. NFE as a process emphasises the active participation of the learners in the decision-making and planning of their non-formal education programmes.

(c) **Non-Formal Education as a Setting**

The third perspective is that of non-formal education as a setting. This perspective emphasises the importance of an informal climate in non-formal education activities. Non-formal education programmes are often conducted within formal settings such as classrooms. The problem is not so much the facilities (such as unsuitable furniture) but the lack of informality and flexibility in the way learning is conducted. For example, many people who conduct non-formal education activities have formal education backgrounds and may not have had much experience and understanding of non-formal education processes and methods. Teachers from the formal system are often perceived as unsuitable as teachers of non-formal education, because they are trained to teach children and not equipped to teach adults (Wellings, 1987). Special training may therefore be necessary to enable them to be better adjusted to the non-formal education learning setting and able to develop non-formal education.

A flexible and less structured setting in non-formal education may enable the use of traditional or indigenous learning processes, methods, strategies and techniques that are otherwise unused and under-valued in the formal settings of the formal system. Such methods include singing and dancing, ceremonials, use of master-apprentice model and games.

The question raised by Khawaja and Brennan in relation to the learning setting of non-formal education and the approach taken in this study is particularly important. "If the setting of non-formal education is to be less formal, what teaching, learning and administrative support structures need to be discovered, rediscovered, adapted or developed to

facilitate a less formal setting of non-formal education?" (Khawaja and Brennan, 1990, p.12).

Conclusion

A General Concept of Non-Formal Education

The various views on non-formal education examined have revealed that non-formal education is not a straight forward concept. However, for the purpose of this article some important features of non-formal education in terms of definition, purpose and perspectives have been determined.

The first is in relation to the definition. Non-formal education is defined as an educational activity that is organised, systematic and is deliberately planned to meet specific purposes in a particular cultural context.

Secondly, non-formal education is not confined to a particular purpose, as it may fulfil a range of educational purposes. It can be used either to bring change to the lives of the people or to maintain the existing values.

Thirdly, non-formal education as a system, non-formal education as a process and non-formal education as a setting, emphasise that non-formal education can be conceptualised according to the three perspectives. As a system it is contrasted with the formal system to provide a better understanding of its special features. As a system it can be an alternative or complementary to the established formal system. As a process, it emphasises the participation of the learners in decisions concerning programming. As a setting, it emphasises the importance of an informal and flexible learning situation, where teaching and learning strategies may be used which are less structured and more familiar to the cultural context.

Bearing in mind the socio-economic context and the diverse cultures in the Pacific region, it is suggested that a generic concept of non-formal education, encompassing some of the key terms described in the

definition, purpose and perspectives may be used in the Pacific context. It is against this generic concept that the localised concept of non-formal education may be compared.

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