



non-formal education

Within policy debates a common differentiation has been made between different forms of provision. Informal, non-formal, and formal programmes have been viewed as very different. Here we explore this categorization and some of the forms of work that exist under the non-formal label in southern countries.

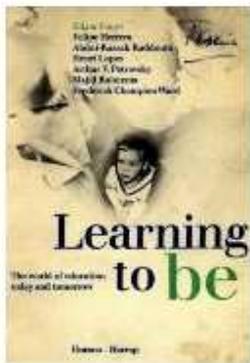
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Non-formal education became part of the international discourse on education policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It can be seen as related to the concepts of recurrent and lifelong learning. Tight (1996: 68) suggests that whereas the latter concepts have to do with the extension of education and learning throughout life, non-formal education is about 'acknowledging the importance of education, learning and training which takes place outside recognized educational institutions'. Fordham (1993) suggests that in the 1970s, four characteristics came be associated with non-formal education:

- Relevance to the needs of disadvantaged groups.
- Concern with specific categories of person.
- A focus on clearly defined purposes.
- Flexibility in organization and methods.

In many northern countries the notion of non-formal education is not common in internal policy debates - preferred alternatives being [community education and community learning](#), [informal education](#) and [social pedagogy](#).

The idea of non-formal education



As Fordham (1993) relates, in 1967 at an international conference in Williamsburg USA, ideas were set out for what was to become a widely read analysis of the growing 'world educational crisis' (Coombs 1968). There was concern about unsuitable curricula; a realization that educational growth and economic growth were not necessarily in step, and that jobs did not emerge directly as a result of educational inputs. Many countries were finding it difficult (politically or economically) to pay for the expansion of formal education.

The conclusion was that formal educational systems had adapted too slowly to the socio-economic changes around them and that they were held back not only by their own conservatism, but also by the inertia of societies themselves. If we also accept that educational policy making tends to follow rather than lead other social trends, then it followed that change would have to come not merely from within formal schooling, but from the wider society and from other sectors within it. It was from this point of departure that planners and economists in the World Bank began to make a distinction between informal, non-formal and formal education. (Fordham 1993: 2)

At around the same time there were moves in UNESCO toward [lifelong education](#) and notions of '[the learning society](#)' which culminated in *Learning to Be* ('The Faure Report', UNESCO 1972). Lifelong learning was to be the 'master concept' that should shape educational systems (UNESCO 1972:182). What emerged was an influential tripartite categorization of learning systems. Its best known statement comes from the work of Combs with Prosser and Ahmed (1973):

Formal education: the hierarchically structured, chronologically graded 'education system', running from primary school through the university and including, in addition to general academic studies, a variety of specialised programmes and institutions for full-time technical and professional training.

Informal education: the truly lifelong process whereby every individual acquires attitudes, values, skills and knowledge from daily experience and the educative influences and resources in his or her environment - from family and neighbours, from work and play, from the market place, the library and the mass media.

Non-formal education: any organised educational activity outside the established formal system - whether operating separately or as an important feature of some broader activity - that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives.

The distinction made is largely administrative. Formal education is linked with schools and training institutions; non-formal with community groups and other organizations; and informal covers what is left, e.g. interactions with friends, family and work colleagues. (See, for example, Coombs and Ahmed 1974). The problem with this is that people often organize educational events as part of their everyday experience and so the lines blur rapidly. As Fordham (1993) comments, these definitions do not imply hard and fast categories. In particular, there may well be some overlap (and confusion) between the informal and the non-formal.

Just how helpful a focus on administrative setting or institutional sponsorship is a matter of some debate. Once we recognize that a considerable amount of education happens beyond the school wall it may be that a simple division between formal and informal education will suffice. It has certainly been the argument of Jeffs and Smith (1990) that the notion of non-formal education has limited use when thinking about process.

So why the term's currency?

Just because something does not make sense in terms of process, does not mean an idea doesn't retain its currency. It has been a convenient way of talking about funding rather than the actual process. As Graham-Brown (1991: 64) says, dividing formal education from out of school education or so-called non-formal education is artificial in many ways. But in some countries, this division reflects the gulf between government provision through the school system, on the one hand, and the needs and interests of marginal populations who are most alienated from the system on the other.

The range of initiatives and programmes that have adopted the title 'non-formal' are many and various. They include literacy and basic education for adults and young people, political and trade union education, 'catching-up' programmes for school drop outs, pre-school education for young children, political and trade union education and various kinds of educational work linked with development initiatives including agricultural extension and training programmes and health education. They also shade over into various examples of both state and private vocational training programmes. The McGivney and Murray (1992) collection *Adult Education in Development* gives a good feel of the sorts of initiatives this might include. They look particularly at health education, literacy, rural development and the role of women in development. However, it can be confusing to use terms like adult education in the context of Southern education - given the age distribution of populations and the large numbers of young people involved in non-formal programmes.

What is also apparent from the literature is that it was politically useful to use a term like non-formal education. As Shukla (1985) has argued by the mid 1960s it was becoming clear that an education system based around schooling could not be sustained because of the sheer cost to already fragile economies. A search for 'new' techniques was therefore on. Second, within the north it was becoming clear that the school was only one amongst many potential educative elements. Concepts such as '[the learning society](#)' were gaining some currency. Third, there was the impact of movements such as that of deschooling (after [Illich](#)).

These were essentially 'western' concerns. At the same time a number of socialist countries initiated large programmes for changing the consciousness, skills and organizations of their populations. They typically used many of the forms that we now label as non-formal education:

Specially trained educators (maybe for 4 or 5 weeks) (not teachers) sent out to local villages etc to set up and run programmes and recruit further helpers and group members.

The use of mass media such as radio and television, things like newsheets and comics.

Provision on a mass scale - a whole region or country is targeted.

Sometimes formal, sometimes informal sanctions against those who did not participate.

Many of these programmes apparently met with considerable success. In this respect Russia, Cuba, Tanzania, Somalia, Ethiopia and Nicaragua were often quoted as having organised successful mass campaigns - particularly in respect of literacy (Coles 1987: 38).

By the mid 1970s a number of non-socialist countries were beginning to turn to the idea of mass non-formal education. It was clear that there remained a large scale and apparently growing problem of illiteracy. It was also clear that economic and social development depended on bringing about changes in many people's thinking.

The development process is in fact an educational process, or rather it should unfailingly be viewed as such. We cannot therefore conceive of development in the absence of education any more than education in the absence of development. (Faundez 1988 quoted by McGivney & Murray 1991: 10)

How, for example, were people to learn to plant new crops or varieties or to farm in ways that might increase production?

There was a further shift amongst the donor agencies working in the South. Whereas there had been a great emphasis on the provision of plant, and particularly prestigious projects, there was a growing realization that development primarily depended on the people themselves and that much more stress should be placed on improving their quality of life. This called for new approaches to formal education; it also gave considerable impetus to non-formal education, and especially to basic education for those who had been largely neglected - the urban and rural poor (Coles 1987: 37). The problem was that these sorts of programmes had not been tried in the market and political conditions associated with Southern capitalist societies.

Contrasts between 'formal' and 'non-formal' programmes

Simkins (1976) analysed non-formal education programme in terms of purposes, timing, content delivery systems and control, and contrasted these with formal educational programmes. The resulting ideal-types provide a useful framework - and bring out the extent to which non-formal education initiatives, while emphasizing flexibility, localness and responsiveness remain located within a [curricula](#) form of education (in contrast with those forms driven by conversation).

Ideal-type models of normal and non-formal education

formal

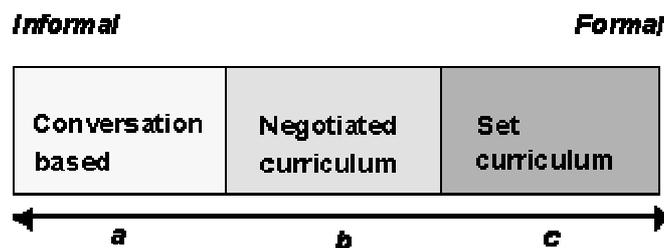
non-formal

purposes	Long-term & general	Short-term & specific
timing	Credential-based long cycle / preparatory / full-time	Non-credential-based short cycle / recurrent / part-time
content	standardized / input centred academic entry requirements determine clientele	individualized / output centred practical clientele determine entry requirements
delivery system	institution-based, isolated from environment. rigidly structured, teacher-centred and resource intensive	environment-based, community related. flexible, learner-centred and resource saving
control	external / hierarchical	self-governing / democratic

(Adapted by Fordham 1993 from Simkins 1977: 12-15)

'Top down and bottom up'

One of the enduring themes in the literature of non-formal education, according to Fordham (1993), has been that the education provided should be in the interests of the learners and that the organization and curriculum planning should preferably be undertaken by the learners themselves: that it should be 'bottom up'. It is also often argued that this should empower learners to understand and if necessary change the social structure around them. Fordham (1993) continues: 'Examples where there is a genuine sense of ownership are not easy to find; and almost all have an element of community outreach as part of the general organization'.



On the other hand examples of top-down non-formal programmes are all too common. Almost all employer-led and State provided training falls into this category. This can be seen as paralleling the distinctions that Jeffs and Smith (1990, 1999) make between formal and informal education via curriculum. In this way formal education would broadly approximate to top-down curriculum formation (c); non-formal to bottom-up or

negotiated curriculum formation (b); and informal education would arguably be a non-curriculum or conversational form (a).

Pointers to the success of non-formal programmes

As Graham-Brown (1991: 74-77) has argued in respect of literacy programmes there are a number of dimensions that have proved to be crucial to effectiveness:

Training and motivation of literacy workers.

The quality and relevance of materials.

The reinforcements of literacy.

It is clear from the studies of literacy campaigns that both the commitment and skills of literacy promoters are very important. Enthusiasm is not enough. It is not that straightforward to facilitate learner participation in dialogue and discussion. Certain skills are needed to put across ideas and so on. Many of the literacy workers are young (mostly between 18 and 25 in the successful Botswana campaign). This meant that they need not be automatically accepted or appreciated. In some campaigns there has been a considerable effort to try to recruit older workers and those who are known and held in good regard in a locality. In many campaigns workers are paid, and the job accords them some status (although not necessarily accreditation or certification). Where volunteers are recruited, for example in the Kenyan initiative, and who live in the local communities, the main incentive is often the hope that this might lead to a full time job.

There has also been an emphasis on developing appropriate materials. Most of the various national literacy campaigns have had some central unit which developed materials etc for the workers etc. to use. To this must be added things like the production of regular radio programmes to support initiatives. However, this is both expensive and sophisticated and it is not proved that easy, for example, to update and change materials quite as has been needed.

Then as Graham-Brown (1991: 76) suggests, once people achieve basic literacy, whatever its precise form, the process creates further demands for post-literacy education, whether to 'catch up' on missed formal education, or to develop organizational or practical skills. At this point things can become quite expensive and complex. The demands are now more sophisticated.

To these specific questions must be added some further problems. To begin with, given that initiatives involve voluntary participation - how are people to be attracted on sufficient scale. This is much less of a problem in systems where there is large scale schooling some legal basis for attendance. The successful campaign in Botswana, for example, touched about 20 per cent of the population - it still left quite a few people illiterate.

In addition, unless the school system is discredited for some political reason, a lower valuation tends to be put on non-formal education, especially for young people. They do not hold the same status (they are local and not special) and often do not lead to accreditation. (Graham Brown 1991: 77)

In conclusion

The notion of non-formal education has been a significant feature of policy debates around education in southern countries for three decades. It has drawn attention to the importance and potential of education, learning and training that takes place outside recognized educational institutions. There are questions about usefulness of the notion when looking at the process of education. It has also gone in and out of fashion. Fordham (1993) comments that if we try to correlate the flourishing of non-formal education and political change then the 1970s can certainly be described as the decade of non-formal education (Rubenson 1982). Similarly the 1980s saw the neglect of non-formal education and Fordham suggests that this was in tune with the politics of the decade, accompanied by greater inequalities both within and between countries. Given the extent to which notions of [lifelong learning](#) and associated ideas have gained ground in recent years it will be interesting to see how the language of policy debates will change over the next few years.

Further reading and references

Coles E. K. T. (1988) *Let the People Learn: The establishment of a department of non-formal education in Botswana*, Manchester: The Centre for Adult and Higher Education, University of Manchester. 137 + ix pages. Provides an interestingly detailed account and review of one attempt to organize non-formal education.

Coombs, P. H. with Prosser, C. and Ahmed, M. (1973) *New Paths to Learning for Rural Children and Youth*, New York: International Council for Educational Development. One of several reports involving Coombs that popularized the institutional or bureaucratic categories of informal, formal and non-formal education. See, also, P. Coombs and M. Ahmed (1974) *Attacking Rural Poverty. How non-formal education can help*, Baltimore: John Hopkins Press.

Foley, G. (1999) *Learning in Social Action. A contribution to understanding informal education*, Leicester: NIACE/London: Zed Books. Explores the significance of the incidental learning that can take place when people are involved in community groups, social struggles and political activity. Foley uses case studies from Australia, Brazil, Zimbabwe and the USA that reflect a range of activities. Chapters on ideology, discourse and learning; learning in a green campaign; the neighbourhood house; learning in Brazilian women's organizations; and political learning and education in the Zimbabwean liberation struggle.

Fordham, P. et al (1979) *Learning Networks in Adult Education. Non formal education on a housing estate*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 250 + viii pages. This is a

substantial account of a neighbourhood project which provides a number of insights into community based provision. Picks up on the definition of non-formal education put forward by Coombs et al.

Illich, I. (1973) *Deschooling Society*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (now published by Marion Boyars). 116 pages. Very influential statement concerning the divisive and dampening effect of schooling. Argues for the disestablishment of schooling and the creation of learning webs. See also his (1975) *Tools for Conviviality*, London: Fontana (now published by Marion Boyars), for a wider political and economic statement

Simkins, T. (1977) *Non-Formal Education and Development. Some critical issues*, Manchester: Department of Adult and Higher Education, University of Manchester. 77 + iv pages. Helpful survey of thinking and practice with case studies (the village polytechnics, Kenya; mass education campaigns in Tanzania; Cuba's 'Schools in the Countryside').

Steele, T. and Taylor, R. (1995) *Learning Independence. A political outline of Indian adult education*, Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education. 151 + vii pages. Fascinating overview of programmes and changes in Indian adult education since the 1940s that looks to a political analysis of its role. Chapters examine the English studies and subaltern histories; education in British India from the early years to independence; Gandhi and the dialectic of modernity; education and social development in India from 1947 to 1964: Nehru and Congress; social education and the dream of nationhood; the non-formal revolution and the National Adult Education Programme; Post NAEP - radical populism and the new social movements; and towards a transformative pedagogy.

Thompson, A. R. (1981) *Education and Development in Africa*, London: Macmillan. 358 + viii pages. Excellent overview that is particularly strong on non-formal education. Chapters examine social change and development; education and schooling; politics and education; economics and education; problems in educational planning; problems of educational innovation; the management of educational reform; non-formal education; re-schooling; and linking formal and non-formal education.

Torres, C. A. (1990) *The Politics of Nonformal Education in Latin America*, New York: Praeger. 204 pages. Torres explores the literacy programs in several Latin American countries--including Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Grenada--as the prime examples of adult educational reform. He examines such issues as: Why are given educational policies created? How are they constructed, planned, and implemented? Who are the most relevant actors in their formulation and operationalization? What are the implications of such policies for both clients and the broader society? What are the fundamental, systematic, and organizational processes involved?

Youngman, F. (2000) *The Political Economy of Adult Education*, London: Zed Books. 270 pages. Useful exploration of adult education and development theory, social inequality and imperialism and aid in adult education.

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