LEARNING HOW TO MAINSTREAM: Experiential knowledge and Grounded Theory

by Cream WRIGHT
Commonwealth Secretariat
This document was commissioned by ADEA for its Biennial Meeting (Arusha, October 7-11, 2001). The views and opinions expressed in this document are those of the authors and should not be attributed to ADEA, to its members or affiliated organisations or to any individual acting on behalf of ADEA.

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I. Introduction:

1. For well over two decades now, education in Africa has been subjected to a plethora of innovations and experiments intended to promote positive change in policy and performance of the sector. These innovations span such areas as policy-making, planning, operational strategy, new pedagogies, programme design, management and organization, inspection and supervision, etc. In the main, they are intended to contribute to increased provision, equitable access and improved quality, as well as helping to promote effective curriculum delivery and efficient management of the system. Many of these innovations originate from external sources or from externally funded projects, but some are also home grown in response to problems and challenges encountered by various stakeholders. Also, while many innovations are within the formal system, the more promising and exciting ones are to be found outside the formal education system.

2. What is most striking about educational innovations in Africa is the sense in which they tend to generate a vicious cycle of rising expectations and unfulfilled promises. Typically, there is much hope and enthusiasm at the start of an innovation. This is followed by investment of much time, effort and resources to put the innovation into practice. Some innovations do take hold and can be regarded as successful. In far too many cases however, innovations seem to fade away for various reasons and eventually suffer “death through decay”. The problem often, is only partly due to problems and inherent weaknesses in the innovations. In many cases failure has more to do with the resilience of the formal system, which seems capable of thwarting and marginalizing innovations that threaten to change it in significant ways. A visit to any African country therefore would reveal a wide range of innovations at various stages of design, implementation and decay (over 700 innovations in Tanzania?). One is also likely to observe a palpable sense of tension or lack of engagement between these innovations and what this paper refers to as mainstream education.

3. Against this background, the contention of this paper is two-fold. Firstly it contends that African countries need a more systematic approach to harnessing and mainstreaming the potential of their most promising educational innovations. Without this, education in Africa will continue to be haunted by a sense of crisis and challenged by the constant threat of decline, despite commendable progress by many countries and strong support from their development partners. Secondly, the paper contends that the most effective way of mainstreaming innovations is to create a holistic system that embraces all forms of education within and outside the formal system. Such a system would, by definition, be more flexible, more diversified and open to change. African countries can therefore make better use of innovations for expanding equitable access to education and for improving educational quality on a sustainable basis.

4. The focus of this paper therefore is on using what we know from educational innovations (especially those outside the formal system), to help develop a systematic approach for harnessing and mainstreaming such innovations as part of a holistic system
of education. In this regard the paper seeks to show how we can draw from case studies that provide us with experiential knowledge, in order to develop a grounded theory on mainstreaming. In essence this paper is about learning how to mainstream.

II. **Basic Concepts and Working Definitions:**

5. There are on-going conceptual difficulties concerning use of terms like formal education, non-formal education, informal education and alternative education. These difficulties stem from the fact that there is a confusing array of boundary crossings and a mixture of similarities and differences between these various forms of education, such that the terms no longer define exclusive categories. In many ways most formal education systems have been able to learn lessons over the years from successful strategies and practices in non-formal education. By the same token, many non-formal or alternative forms of education have sought to emulate key features of the formal system, and some were even modeled on it in the first place. In the face of such reality, the ADEA Working Group on Non-Formal Education has been concerned with ways of bridging the divide between so-called formal and non-formal education. It has been argued by various interested parties associated with the working group, that this distinction is redundant and that the very concepts of formal education and non-formal education are themselves obsolete. Others have suggested that perhaps we need to revisit the whole range of concepts such as formal, non-formal, informal and alternative, to be clear about these widely used labels that influence and affect so much of what we do and how we perceive education provision in its various forms.

6. The position taken in this paper is not to enter into a detailed debate about these concepts, because that can easily lead to being trapped in the cul-de-sac of terminology. Instead this paper seeks to create a more meaningful categorization that embraces and subsumes the notions of formal, non-formal, informal and alternative education. It is in this sense that the notion of mainstream education is used in this paper to define a category of education that is based not only on certain key characteristics, but also on some status features (recognition, perception, acceptance, etc.) as well as certain norms that are symbolic of the category. It is therefore critical to outline at the start, what the concept of mainstream education entails and how it relates to the objective of creating a holistic system of education.

7. Once this is established there are two other related concepts that will need to be outlined and clarified. These are the concepts of experiential knowledge and grounded theory, which are regarded in this paper as key tools for mainstreaming. By outlining and clarifying these three concepts, the paper will provide a conceptual framework within which we can develop practical strategies for learning how to mainstream.
II. (a). **Mainstream**

8. The so-called formal school system is a relatively recent social invention, but it can readily be portrayed as the core of what is being termed mainstream education in this paper. Mainstream education is therefore defined firstly by certain *basic characteristics* that are normally associated with the formal school system. These include the following:

- **Location specific**: There is usually a specific place or location (school) at which the learning/teaching process is designated to take place.

- **Time bound**: Learners and teachers assemble at the location at designated times and stay on for prescribed time periods (day, term, year) for schooling to take place.

- **Time structured**: The school day is usually structured in terms of number of periods during which different subjects and curriculum areas are covered. The whole school year is structured into a number of terms or semesters made up of a prescribed number of weeks.

- **Learner structured**: Learners usually grouped by age (cohorts) and channeled into levels or “classes” corresponding to age and prescribed learning for that age group.

- **Programme structured**: The prescribed learning or curriculum is structured into subjects or disciplines that are taught separately, as well as levels that normally tie in with learners’ age. Hence the programme for a given cycle spans all the relevant disciplines and the levels (grades/classes) that make up that cycle.

- **Sequenced Learning**: The curriculum is normally sequenced so that certain objectives need to be achieved at a certain level or class before progression to the next class and its own set of prescribed learning achievements.

- **Prescribed Learning**: The curriculum usually reflects national goals and priorities and could be open to regional and local variations, but involves set standards enforced through national tests and examinations.

- **Specialist staffing**: Normal requirement is for staff to be qualified professionals (teachers) with knowledge of subject matter and pedagogical skills, etc.

- **Specialist resources**: Standard items of furniture and equipment are unique to schools and these are usually regarded as amongst the key characteristics (desks, seats, chalk, blackboard, etc) of a normal school.

9. The key characteristics illustrated above help to make schools recognisable throughout the world, regardless of differences in quality of location (buildings/spaces), conditions of learners and teachers, state of facilities and equipment, etc. There is always
something about schools and hospitals that make them readily identifiable, no matter which country we are dealing with. These key characteristics have come to represent the visible symbols and short-cut icons of the social institutions, and it is logical to assume that this also makes the institutions in question part of mainstream education.

10. However such ready identification does not help us deal with the problem of differentiating formal education from non-formal, informal or alternative education. Are mobile schools in Kenya formal or informal? Should we say that secondary education by distance-learning methods in Malawi are formal or non-formal simply on the basis of the mode of delivery? Many formal education institutions are flexible and do not conform to all the key characteristics highlighted above. Similarly some community schools and other learning centers that are regarded as non-formal display quite a number of the characteristics associated with formal schools. The contention therefore is that whilst these characteristics provide a reasonable rule of thumb to help distinguish formal from non-formal and other alternative forms of education, they do not constitute necessary and sufficient grounds for making such distinctions.

11. In addition to these basic characteristics, mainstream education can be defined by a number of features that cluster around the key factor of official recognition. Most governments have mechanisms and procedures in place for granting recognition to educational institutions that are owned and/or operated by NGOs, community based organisations or private sector providers. Such official recognition usually means that certain standards have been met and conditions fulfilled that effectively make the learning institution part of the mainstream. In principle, government recognition gives a new status to an institution, regardless of whether it is viewed as formal or non-formal. In practice however institutions that gain such recognition are usually closely akin to the formal institutions that are already part of the mainstream. So why is recognition seen as a defining feature of mainstream education? When an institution gains recognition there are other things that follow. Sometimes recognition means access to public funding and subsidy or access to national tests/examinations. It also means that learners can be sure that their learning achievements at the institution will be accepted by employers, as well as by institutions at the next stage of the education system. Official recognition therefore leads to acceptance by society (especially employers), thereby linking the institution with the labor market and social advancement generally. This is a key element in the concept of mainstream education for this paper. Mainstream education not only has some key characteristics that are usually to be found in the so-called formal system of education, but also has official recognition and the public acceptance that goes with it.

12. A third category of defining features of mainstream education is the perception that derives from the other features outlined above. An education that has readily identifiable characteristics akin to those of the formal school system, and also has official recognition by the government, will generally be perceived as being of value. Target groups are more likely to regard it as “real education” and “the right thing to pursue”. We are constantly reminded by colleagues in Asia, that whilst some alternative programmes appear attractive we should be aware that they are not popular options for the target groups concerned. “The poor almost never willingly choose non-formal alternatives. It is
simply that they do not have a choice and must either access such alternatives or go without education”. It is an unfortunate fact that innovative and well-designed education programmes sometimes fail because of the wrong perception. Target groups can easily see such programmes as an attempt to offer them an inferior form of education that is different from the formal system and that lacks the recognition and acceptance that give social / economic value to any education programme.

13. It is critical to understand the influence of perception on mainstreaming. There are even some programmes within formal school systems that are effectively marginalised because of the perception of learners and their parents that these programmes lack the recognition and acceptance that would provide social / economic value. This is a major problem for many technical/vocational subjects in secondary schools for instance.

14. A fourth defining feature of mainstream education is that of being an intrinsic part of a chain of examination and certification processes. There are so-called public examinations and standard qualifications (certification of learning achievements) that constitute a norm against which education programmes can be measured. Programmes and institutions that deal with such examinations and qualifications can usually be regarded as mainstream. Those that do not lead to this type of examination and certification are generally regarded as being somehow outside the mainstream. In general, publicly recognised examinations and qualifications provide a kind of quality assurance mechanism or kite mark that helps us define and understand mainstream education better.

15. As a result of these characteristics and features that define mainstream education, we can also argue for certain symbolic attributes that are usually to be found in this type of education. The most important of these symbolic attributes have to do with the public budget and the official education statistics. Mainstream education is generally provided for on a regular and predictable basis in the government’s education budget. The level of public funding will vary from fully funded government owned/maintained schools to the subsidized privately owned institutions, and many variations. This is an important feature that distinguishes mainstream education, although not all mainstream institutions receive regular and reliable public funding and in some countries public funding does go to institutions that are not mainstream.

16. In much the same way, mainstream education features in the official statistics on education. Most countries are able to tell how many are enrolled at different levels, how the cohorts flow through the system, how many drop out or complete the prescribed cycle and how many transit to the next stage of the formal system. However there is invariably no data on those who may be acquiring learning outside of the formal system in various non-formal and alternative education programmes. It often appears that what is not in the mainstream does not count, and conversely what is not counted is not mainstream. This also appears to be linked to budgeting and access to public funds. It would seem that what governments do not or cannot count, they cannot or will not fund. Hence many of the innovative non-formal and alternative education programmes do not feature in official statistics on education and do not receive regular funding in the education budget. Even more importantly, governments do not invest on policy, standards, inspection, monitoring
and supervision for these programmes in the same way as they do for mainstream education. It is these types of symbolic features that combine with the characteristics and factors described earlier to help define mainstream education.

II.(b) Experiential Knowledge

17. The concept of experiential knowledge is crucial for understanding how we can learn from practice in order to inform theory that can help us develop pragmatic solutions to the problems facing our education systems. What is termed experiential knowledge in this paper is essentially practitioner knowledge. It comes as much from doing as from thinking about doing. For instance, effective teachers do not simply do various things in their classrooms to promote learning. They also reflect on their practice and learn from it. This notion of the “reflective practitioner” is at the heart of building and using experience in the form of experiential knowledge.

18. The “reflective practitioner” is the source of experiential knowledge. This term can apply equally to classroom teachers, managers and administrators, curriculum designers, policy analysts, and researchers. When they are effective, all of these practitioners display the same sequence of eclectic action and reflection that propels them towards mastery of their field. They typically draw on some body of theoretical knowledge / understanding to plan, design and prepare for their work. They then do their work (practice) and they also reflect on what they do in order to learn how to do things better over time. This is the essence of experience! The experienced teacher not only draws on his/her knowledge of subject matter, learning theory and syllabus interpretation, but also uses an intrinsic and instinctive form of knowledge and understanding developed over years of practice and reflection. This has to do with what works in different classroom settings, how best to help different groups of learners to understand a subject, making best use of resources in the classroom and dealing with difficult topics in different ways. The same is true for other education practitioners such as policy advisers, curriculum planners, researchers, managers, etc. This cumulative build up of experiential knowledge is what leads to the type of mastery that we recognize and value in outstanding master practitioners.

19. In dealing with innovations, experiential knowledge can be used as a tool for developing a theory of how to do things better. By repeatedly gaining insight into what works and how things work with a variety of educational innovations in different settings, we begin to build a picture of the factors that support or obstruct progress with innovations. It is this approach that is advocated in this paper.
II.(c) **Grounded Theory**

20. Theories are usually the result of observation, experimentation and hypothesis testing. In most cases, particularly for the social world, theories do not provide us with certainties. They give us a framework and conceptual tools for understanding and acting on our world, in a manner that would lead to outcomes that are predictable within certain limits. In the case of grounded theory, the main features are that it is rooted in practical reality, it is context sensitive, it is heuristic in nature, and it is linked to action.

21. This means that grounded theory relies critically on experiential knowledge, which derives from reflection on practice. By systematically reviewing and organising reflections on practice (evaluation) related to an innovation, we could map out the main factors that support or inhibit successful innovation. However, this applies only to the particular context rather than to innovations in general. Hence grounded theory tends to be about understanding how an innovation was made to work (or failed to work) in a specific context. It therefore only gives us a basis for doing further innovations in that context or in very similar contexts. Grounded theory is always work in progress in that it constantly needs to be extended and refined to reflect the variety of changing contexts in which we attempt to innovate. Evaluation of an innovation in a particular context gives us the initial makings of a grounded theory. This then needs to be extended and refined on the basis of further evaluations in an increasingly widening range of innovation contexts.

22. As we work on different contexts, the grounded theory becomes more robust and useful as a practical tool for doing innovation. The theory is thus both heuristic and action-oriented. When developing grounded theory we are not so much concerned with establishing causality and statistical significance in the relationship between various factors. Rather, the focus is on gaining sufficient understanding of how different factors relate to each other and the ways in which they influence success or failure of an innovation. It is through the heuristic process of confirming and modifying our initial understanding, as we work on different contexts, that we begin to build a feasible grounded theory that can guide future efforts at innovation.

III. **Living on the Margins:**

23. Education programmes and institutions that are outside the mainstream share a common fate of living on the margins. If we are serious about mainstreaming, then we need to understand how and why such programmes tend to be marginalised. From various case studies on non-formal education programmes we can begin to map out some of the factors that keep NFE in the margins:

- **Small Scale** – Many innovations were designed to cope with specific problems on a small scale and in fact become successful and manageable precisely because of this
characteristic. However this has the disadvantage of making such innovations appear unworkable in the mainstream, with its large-scale features.

- **Localised** - Innovations are designed in specific contexts and are therefore suited to the local situation. This raises the problem of transference to different contexts and localities, and tends to keep such innovations in the margins.

- **Poorly Resourced** – In terms of staffing, materials and other resources, innovations outside the mainstream tend to be poorly resourced, especially after the initial phase of enthusiasm and support. This can sometimes make them appear to be inferior versions of mainstream programmes. There is therefore a reluctance to transfer or scale up such innovations.

- **Unconventional** – Innovations can be scary. They often have unconventional features that make target groups pause and ask questions such as “is this really education?” “how far is this recognised and what guarantees do we have that it will deliver quality learning?”

- **Risk Prone** – As with anything new and different there are always risks associated with education innovations. Who wants to take risks with their future?

- **Highly Fragmented** – The plethora of innovations outside the mainstream is often difficult to consolidate and make sense of. This gives the impression that mainstream education is an island of stability in a sea of experimentation.

- **Isolated and Protected** – Sometimes stakeholders who start and promote successful innovations are so protective of their work that they resist attempts to adapt it in any way or to move it out of their sphere of influence. Innovations become possessions to be forever associated with certain individuals or groups and therefore do not appear to be attractive to those who wish to generalise the innovation to other settings.

- **Patronised (curios)** – In some situations there is a strange patronizing attitude that does not wish to see some innovations modified or adapted to make them part of the mainstream.

IV. **The Case for Mainstreaming:**

24. Mainstreaming involves a number of processes such as moving from the margins and going to scale. More importantly it involves things like gaining official recognition and public acceptance, as well as having access to regular public funding and being an integral part of the examination system and the education statistics system (EMIS). The key challenge of course is to achieve all of this without sacrificing the essence of what makes these alternatives so attractive as education innovations! This raises the question in some quarters about the need for mainstreaming. Purists suggest that we leave well alone. There will be interesting innovations that succeed or fail and we can learn from them, but
we do not need to try to make these innovations part of mainstream education. In reply, it can be argued that mainstream education in most African countries has proved perennially incapable of learning key lessons from innovations precisely because it is so inflexible and monolithic. The case for mainstreaming is therefore firstly, to infuse mainstream education with new types of programmes, structures and forms of organization, etc. that would transform it into a more holistic system that is capable of responding to change and learning from experience.

25. Secondly, mainstreaming is critical for equity reasons. Why do so many African countries continue to spend such a high proportion of public resources on the so-called formal school system, whilst ignoring the alternatives through which a sizeable proportion of their population manage to access learning opportunities? There is a deep sense of social injustice in this pattern of expenditure, but there is also a reluctance to change things because of uncertainties over the implications and consequences of change. The key questions to be asked in changing this situation have to do with what to fund and why. Governments keen to pursue EFA should not be stuck on supporting institutions, but should try to understand where, when and how their citizens access and acquire quality learning opportunities. Educational statistics as well as allocation of public funds and quality assurance mechanisms should all then be based on the answers to these types of questions. In this way it should be possible to support access to quality education wherever and however it takes place. It should also be possible to move towards a type of mainstream education that is versatile, flexible and responsive in meeting basic needs.

V. Learning How to Mainstream:

26. The business of mainstreaming involves drawing on experiential knowledge through systematic evaluation and case studies in different settings. These settings involve not only education but also many other contextual features such as political climate, economic conditions, social/cultural patterns, etc. All these features as well as the mainly educational factors would come into play as we try to understand how to mainstream say community schools that operate multiple shifts, a localised curriculum and flexible attendance policy to suit local demand and constraints in some rural settings in Africa.

27. From a single evaluation or case study of such community schools, we could begin to identify the factors that make this successful as a viable, effective and efficient provision of learning opportunities for the particular context. We could also begin to identify those factors that appear to impede the success of this type of innovative education. As we move to study community schools in other settings, we would need to ask questions about all these initial factors, as well as trying to identify new ones:

- How do these factors manifest themselves and work out in other settings?

- What are the lessons from other regions outside Africa?
• Are there new factors prominent in the case studies from outside Africa?
• What factors appear to hold strong in different settings?
• Which factors/features appear transferable to other contexts?
• How can we take this innovation to scale without compromising key factors?
• What do we need to do to gain official recognition for this type of education?
• What are the useful indicators that can be used to include this in the statistics?
• On what basis can we advocate for regular funding for this type of education?
• How can we improve this type of education so that it becomes socially acceptable?

VI. Towards a Grounded Theory:

28. As we accumulate experience of mainstreaming educational innovations, we can move towards developing a grounded theory. This would be an increasingly complex set of key factors that promote innovation as well as those that inhibit innovation, and they would be set out in a relational diagram that shows how they typically influence innovation in different settings and contexts. Through such a theory we can move from simply trying out innovations that never seem to go beyond their initial success in a specific context, to introducing innovations that will have predictable outcomes in different settings.

29. A grounded theory would become one of the essential tools for those engaged in change that is aimed at creating a more holistic and flexible type of mainstream education. From the start of any innovation the chances for success could be enhanced by taking account of the factors highlighted in grounded theory, keeping in mind that such a theory is based on the accumulation of experiential knowledge gained from reflection (evaluation) and action relating to various innovative practices.