

# ***INTERFACING NFE (NON-FORMAL EDUCATION) AND OL (OPEN LEARNING) PROVISIONS WITH MAIN STREAMED EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF EMERGING CONCEPTUALISATIONS.***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

In approaching this presentation I decided that the most useful thing to do would be to identify some key issues embedded in the terminological diversity of the workshop's discourse, as illustrated by the title given to this topic in the programme. This brief discourse analysis seeks to clarify conceptualisations and highlight questions for discussion.

## **THE MAIN ARGUMENT IN THE WORKSHOP RATIONALE**

It seems to me that the Position Paper giving the rationale for the workshop embodies an argument with four essential points, as follows:

- Point 1: There are two conceptually distinct categories of education, namely formal and non-formal education.
- Point 2: These categories are currently separated in terms of policy and provision.
- Point 3: This practical separation is inadequate in relation to meeting the diversity of needs for education in society.
- Point 4: The separation should be overcome by establishing a new relationship between the two within a broad systemic framework of lifelong learning.

## **KEY ISSUES**

### **Point 1 - There are two conceptual categories of education**

The workshop discourse is based on the categories formal and non-formal education. A variety of synonyms and associated terms are used for each of these categories, as follows:

Formal Education  
Conventional education  
Mainstream education  
Contact education  
In-school education

Non-formal Education  
Non-conventional education  
**Adult education**  
Distance learning/education  
Out-of-school education  
Informal education  
Alternative modes  
Continuing education and training  
Open learning  
Learning without frontiers

This categorisation implicitly takes the school-university system as the point of reference, defining non-formal education negatively as education which does not take place in the context of the

school-university system. The dominant paradigm of education is therefore the school. Schooling has a number of characteristics, which include the following: full-time, age-defined learners, long cycle, hierarchical, qualification-based, rigid pedagogy, institutionalised, bureaucratic control, resource intensive. By definition, non-formal education refers to learning programmes which have the opposite characteristics. Indeed a number of writers in the 1970s, such as Simkins and Paulston, produced typologies of contrasting characteristics for the two categories.

However, the application of these typologies to specific programmes raises conceptual problems because programmes labelled non-formal often share many of the characteristics attributed to schooling (for example, the correspondence courses and adult literacy programme of Botswana's Department of Non Formal Education). The range of terminology associated with non-formal education in the workshop discourse identified in the table above indicates the problem of definition. There is in fact little consistency in how the term non-formal education is used and its functional utility is open to question.

Question: is the conceptual distinction between-formal and non-formal education analytically sound and useful?

### **Point 2 - The two categories are separate in practical terms**

The workshop documents suggest that the two categories of education are currently separate in the actuality of policy and provision. The discourse assumes a 'dichotomy' and 'compartmentalisation' between formal and non-formal education. This is a practical assumption that needs empirical analysis. It seems to me that at the policy level the reality of the late 1990s may often contradict this assumption. For example in Botswana, Namibia and South Africa there are some education policies which transcend the dichotomy. Similarly, is it true that provision is compartmentalised? Many important areas of current expansion in educational provision, such as adult basic education and training, distance learning and human resource development, are difficult to conceptualise within the formal/non-formal paradigm.

Question: does the use of the formal/non-formal dichotomy at the level of discourse both obscure practical realities and disable holistic thinking about educational strategies?

### **Point 3 - The practical separation of the categories is inadequate in relation to educational needs**

The problematic behind the Position Paper is the failure of the Education for All initiative to ensure basic education for all children and young people. The paper argues that the continuing failure of schooling to ensure that all children and young people both enter and complete a basic cycle of education highlights the importance of developing educational provisions that offer a more diverse set of learning opportunities for children, young people and adults.

The discourse is one of meeting 'multiple and diverse learning needs' through multiple arrangements, the diversification of delivery systems and alternative modes of participation. The conceptualisation is essentially one of how to transcend the limitations of the formal school system through new and enhanced non-formal provisions. Thus although the separation of the categories is seen as inadequate in practical terms, it is still adhered to at the conceptual level. This means that the discourse in relation to educational reform is lop-sided and deflects attention from the desirability and possibility of changes in the school system.

Question: to what extent does the conceptual distinction of formal and non-formal education constrain the development of a comprehensive approach to educational reform?

#### **Point 4 - The separation of the categories should be overcome**

The documents propose that the practical boundaries between the two categories should be reduced. The terminology used for expressing this idea is unstable as it includes both 'interfacing' (which implies close interaction between two or more systems) and 'integration' (which implies the combining of separate elements into a single system). The possibility of a new relationship between formal and non-formal education is expressed in terms of a 'broad systemic framework' for different delivery systems.

This framework is envisaged in terms of 'emerging conceptualisations'. These are not spelt out but I take the phrase to refer to the discourse that has emerged in the 1990s which focuses on *learning* rather than education. This discourse includes ideas such as: the expanded conception of adult learning advocated by the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education in 1997; the UNESCO programme 'Learning Without Frontiers'; the concepts of the learning community and the learning society; the philosophy of open learning; and, above all, the increasingly prominent idea of life-long learning. Indeed life-long learning is explicitly mentioned in the workshop documents as the underlying concept for a unified education system.

**Question:** can the concept of life-long learning provide the basis for a new way of thinking about education that moves the discourse beyond the formal/non-formal categorisation?

#### **BACK TO THE FUTURE?**

The categorisation of a nation's total educational effort into formal and non-formal was first given wide currency in 1968 by Coombs in his book *The World Educational Crisis*, which analysed the perceived failure of formal schooling at the time. Coombs used the categorisation to draw attention to the importance of the wide range of activities taking place outside formal education systems. His chapter on the topic argued for: a) getting a clearer picture of what is being done in non formal education; b) developing a more effective relationship between the two, including an over-all planning approach; c) undertaking applied research on the non formal sector to achieve a) and b). His 1968 agenda is strikingly similar to that of this workshop.

Coombs was also responsible for the most influential definition of formal and nonformal education in his 1973 book *New Paths to Learning*. The attached extract shows a terminology and set of concerns that are almost identical with those of the workshop - see, for example, the last paragraph. This should alert us to the fact that 'emerging conceptualisations' may not be radically different from earlier ideas. Indeed, the workshop title even states that the task is to 'revive' a discourse rather than forge a new one.

**Question:** why is the discourse of this workshop, which is being held in 1999, so similar to that of Coombs in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and what are the implications?

#### **CONCLUSION**

The discourse of the workshop documents is based on a terminology which needs to be examined with respect to its conceptual basis and the issues it incorporates. The questions above seek to stimulate such an examination. They may help to clarify the final question that arises.

**Question:** what is *the fundamental problem* that the workshop seeks to address?