Three Channels of Education in Developing Countries: Some Needed Reforms

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Formal, Non-formal, Incidental—these are the three channels along which a society conducts its entire educational process, and to which individuals get exposed in varying degrees at different stages of their lives. Occasionally these constituent elements blend happily into an integrated effort, but more often they come into conflict, become lopsided, creating inequity, and anti-development and unjust situations, by tending the classes rather than masses. Drawing attention to these, the paper suggests some reforms both in the Formal and Non-formal channels, so that education plays its destined role in a vibrant manner in establishing a development-oriented society which is just, equitable and harmonious.

Three Channels of Education

The total educational process of a society consists of three distinct channels which operate side by side:

(a) Schools or the formal education system.

(b) Non-formal educational activities organized outside the formal education system and consciously aimed at meeting specific learning needs of children, youth or adults.

(c) Incidental education or learning that results from merely living in society, or engaging in work, or through contacts with other members of the society and exposure to social events and movements.

Every individual is generally exposed to all these three channels of education, although the influence of each channel varies greatly from one period of life to another. Incidental education, for instance, is most effective in the early years of life, formal education during childhood and youth, and non-formal education during adulthood. Similarly, all social groups are exposed to every channel; but different social groups derive unequal benefits from them. The privileged upper and middle classes, for instance, are the principle beneficiaries of secondary and higher education in developing countries, while the vast bulk of the poor people receive little or no benefit from formal education and are mainly educated through the incidental and non-formal channels. Sometimes, all these three channels are inter-related and planned in an integrated fashion to give the best results. For instance, the school often provides, not only formal education, but a good deal of non-formal education through programmes like study-service or extra-curricular activities, and

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excellent incidental education through its functioning as a miniature community. Similarly, a good programme of in-service professional education for doctors, for example, is organised through an appropriate atmosphere and good working conditions in hospitals, non-formal programmes of professional growth (e.g. participation in seminars or keeping in touch with professional journals) and periodical refresher courses within the formal system. But very often, this well-designed co-ordination is absent and these three channels pull in different directions or are geared to contradictory purposes. For instance, the incidental and most non-formal education in a traditional society tends to be conservative and to support the status quo in values, beliefs and lifestyle while formal and new non-formal channels strive to modernize them, often with little success. Similarly, the almost exclusive monopoly of secondary and higher education by the upper and middle classes alienates them from the masses in developing societies (who are mostly educated through incidental and non-formal education), transforms them into an exploiting rather than a service group, tends to generate social tensions and hinders development. It is therefore, obvious that educational planning cannot afford to concentrate on formal education alone, as it has unfortunately done in the past. It must take into account all the three channels of education—incidental, non-formal and formal—and strive to ensure that they are properly interrelated to provide complementary and mutually supportive services in order to reach the identical goals of individual growth and social development in the best and most economical manner possible.

The Present Situation in Developing Countries

In most developing countries, there are, at present, three distinct categories of educational services.

(1) Formal Education: The first and the most extensive service is that of formal education or the schools. It is on this service that national governments incur the largest part of their educational expenditures. And yet its effective coverage is woefully limited. At the pre-school stage, its services cover mostly the children of the urban well-to-do. At the elementary stage, most of these countries have been unable to provide universal education; and the high rate of drop-outs or push-outs implies that only a small proportion of their children complete the elementary school. In secondary and higher education the system is quantitatively limited and restricted mainly to the upper and middle classes. There are hardly any programmes for adults among whom illiteracy rates are high. Qualitatively also, the formal system leaves a good deal to be desired; and its main weaknesses are that it continues (or even widens) the gulf between the classes and the masses and that its relationship to “development” understood in terms of the improvement in the over-all standards of living of the deprived and poor is generally tenuous and often negative.

(2) Non-formal Channels of Education: Side by side with the formal education system, a sector of modern “non-formal” channels of education has also grown up. This includes the mass media—press, film, radio and television. It also includes the library services and special governmental programmes such as agricul-
tural extension or family planning or the training components of programmes like development of small-scale, cottage or village industries. But even here, the picture of beneficiaries (and hence the objectives and content as well) gets distorted because of social and economic inequalities. In India, for instance, the English press is by far the best. But its use is limited to the elite while the Indian language press is nowhere so well developed, nor does it reach the masses because of their illiteracy. The film has little educational content and is mostly a negative tool for development. The radio reaches people but its educational value is small. The television is still limited to the rich in a few cities. The health services over-emphasize curative aspects and their preventive and promotive aspects which could provide scope for non-formal education are still largely under-utilized; and so on. On the whole, it may be said that even today the modern non-formal education sector is also mainly oriented to the westernized, the haves and the elite rather than to the masses, and it is more concerned with the continuance and strengthening of the position of the privileged than with development as such or with improving the standards of living of the poor and underprivileged.

(3) Traditional Non-formal and Incidental Education: The traditional sector of non-formal and incidental education still continues to dominate the scene. In fact, it is through these channels that the vast bulk of the people still receive their education and are socialized. In India, for instance, the agriculturists still learn their vocational skills by practical experience on the family farm; and most of the craftsmen and artisans still learn their trades by apprenticeship to parents just as girls learn home-craft and child-rearing by apprenticeship to their mothers. In fact, vocational skills in the large unorganized sectors are generally learnt through the traditional, incidental and non-formal education. Similarly, the whole field of folk games, folk music, folk drama and folk arts is still outside the formal school and within the traditional sectors. The value system of the masses, their beliefs and life-styles are still determined by incidental and traditional non-formal education which has three main weaknesses: (a) It is inadequate and does not cover several important aspects of modernity (e.g. science and technology); (b) It is erroneous in several respects and rests on outdated knowledge and beliefs long since disproved; and (c) It is too old-fashioned and static to be an instrument for helping the individual to adjust himself/herself to the rapidly changing modern societies. In fact, it is these aspects of the incidental and traditional non-formal education (which are almost the exclusive tools of mass education) that constitute the major psychological and cultural bottlenecks to development.

It is obvious that this fragmented and often antithetical system creates more problems than it solves. Therefore, the task facing most developing countries is to transform this unhappy position and to develop both formal and non-formal education and relate them to one another in such a way that the essential climate, skills and workers for development are created.

Some Needed Reforms: Formal Education

What are the changes needed in the existing system of formal education to realize this objective? We shall briefly refer to

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four of them for they broadly cover all the essential aspects of the reforms required.

(1) **Emphasize Adult Education**: Perhaps the most important change needed is to emphasize adult education. The old view that "education" is essential only during childhood and youth is now outdated; and we must look upon education as a life-long process and strive to create a learning society. For this purpose, adult education which can be best promoted through non-formal channels should become an integral and important part of the formal education system. Moreover, in developing countries, besides literacy the highest emphasis will have to be laid on elimination of adult illiteracy and on adequate follow-up work as a part of this programme. What is even more important, this programme should imply not only functional literacy or learning of vocational skills, but also awakening of the poor and underprivileged to the social reality and organizing them so that they can improve their standards of living and assert themselves.

(2) **Change Elementary Education**: Equally urgent is the need to change the formal system of elementary education which is now based on a single-point entry (in Grade 1 at about the age of five or six years), sequential annual promotions from class to class, full-time attendance by pupils, and instruction by full-time and professionally trained teachers. The costs of such a system are high, so that its extent necessarily becomes limited in a poor country. Moreover, this system does not allow a second chance to those unfortunate children who miss its single entry point; and it also drops or pushes out all those grown up children who are compelled to work at home or outside for economic considerations. It is therefore, necessary to adopt a multiple-entry system and to devise non-formal channels of education to meet the needs of the vast bulk of poor children who cannot avail themselves of the existing system of full-time formal elementary education. This is the only way in which elementary education can be made universal. As in the case of adult education, the content and ethos of the entire system which is oriented to the upper and middle classes will also have to be changed to suit the needs of the masses.

(3) **Increase Accessibility**: The access of the poor and underprivileged groups to secondary and higher education is now extremely limited; and it is essential to widen it, partly through a liberal programme of scholarships to talented children from economically handicapped groups but mainly by the adoption of several non-formal programmes. To begin with, the overemphasis now laid on a single uninterrupted career from Grade 1 to Ph. D., should be abandoned and it should be recognized that it is much better to adopt a system of recurrent education under which a student alternates between school and work and enriches both. Secondly correspondence education and sandwich courses should be widely promoted and private study encouraged so that workers have good access to secondary and higher education and can promote individual growth or enhance career prospects. Lastly, all examinations should be thrown open to private candidates as well. These changes are needed not only in general education, but even more so in vocational and professional education.

(4) **Extend Institutions**: The fourth
The principal change needed is to extend its coverage to include the masses of poor and underprivileged people, especially those living in the rural and remote areas. As literacy spreads, the press (especially the Indian language press) and the library services will begin to come into their own. Equally urgent efforts are needed to increase the use of film, radio and television. But an even greater change needed is to improve the quality of their programmes and to gear them closely to development and needs of the people so that these mass media are used as instruments for education of the people rather than as tools for the entertainment of the have-nots or for the provision of a romantic escape to the have-nots.

(2) Traditional Sector: Perhaps the most important changes needed are in the traditional programmes of non-formal education which, as was pointed out earlier, are practically the sole channels of education for the masses and which are now languishing for want of academic and financial support. Here our efforts will have to be developed on three main fronts. The first is to give them an adequate status and official support so that they gain in prestige and come to be regarded as at least equal to the modern forms of non-formal education. The second is to give them full academic support: this will be possible only if academics begin to study them and take interest in them in large numbers. The third is to develop them as powerful instruments of modernization and development: this will be possible if their content is radically transformed by including modern science and an appropriate social philosophy of development. If these efforts are made, we shall be taking steps to modernize the entire

Some Needed Reforms: Non-Formal Education

If an integrated system of formal and non-formal education is to be created, changes in the formal system (like those indicated in the preceding paras) are necessary but not sufficient. They will have to be accompanied by corresponding changes in the modern and traditional non-formal sectors as well.

(1) Modern Sector: In so far as the modern non-formal sector is concerned, the principal change needed is to accept "extension" as a responsibility of all educational institutions, to make the school a centre of the community, and to involve all students and teachers in programmes of non-formal education aimed at those sections of society which are unable to take advantage of the formal system. The 'study-service' scheme is one example of the manner in which institutions of higher education can be involved in programmes of development and in generating important programmes of non-formal education for the people. At the secondary and elementary levels, students and teachers can be similarly used for programmes of adult education for the community and in developmental tasks of no mean significance. In fact, such programmes will enrich formal education and also help improve the quality of non-formal education programmes even while cutting down their costs.

The great advantages of the type of change proposed above are obvious. They will improve the quality of the formal system, extend its coverage, link education more closely with development, bring the upper classes and masses together, and help create a homogeneous and egalitarian social order.

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society instead of concentrating our efforts, as we have done so far, on modernizing the elite only.

Some Needed Reforms: Incidental Education

Although we do not propose to deal with incidental education in detail, one point needs to be emphasized here, viz., the reforms proposed above in the formal and non-formal sectors will result in an improvement of the quality of incidental education. All programmes of adult education of the masses (which should also be accompanied by improvement of their standards of living) will improve the atmosphere and conditions of living in their families. This will inevitably provide better incidental education to their children and make them more receptive to the programmes of formal and non-formal education. Similarly, the quality of social life itself is bound to change when the people as a whole are initiated to scientific ways of thinking and new concepts in social philosophy and are helped to organize and assert themselves to improve their standards of living. This new social atmosphere will necessarily add another valuable dimension to the incidental education which all members of the society receive. Needless to say, this improvement of the incidental education will, in its turn, lead to further qualitative improvement in formal and non-formal education.

A New Education and a New Society

The preceding discussion has highlighted the contradictions and weaknesses within the existing educational systems of developing countries. These nations have evolved fragmented and uncoordinated systems of education in which the channels of formal, modern non-formal, traditional non-formal and incidental education often have different objectives, cater to different social groups and, on the whole, hinder rather than help development. This educational scene is, in a way, a reflex of such an inequilateral social and economic system in which the modernized (or rather westernized) and educated elite live beside large masses of uneducated and traditional people, and in which a small sector of modernized and organized industry co-exists with a large unorganized sector of agriculture and traditional crafts. To improve this unhappy state of affairs, we must evolve an integrated system of education in which all the three channels of incidental, non-formal (whether traditional or modern) and formal education are properly linked and made to serve complementary and inter-dependent objectives instead of running them as parallel and often contradictory systems as we do at present. This is the only way to provide life-long education to all and to create a learning society. This will imply extensive changes, not only in the content, processes and forms of formal education at all stages and their integration with appropriate forms of non-formal education but also equally considerable changes in the modern forms of non-formal education and a supreme effort to modernize and develop all traditional forms of non-formal education as well. Such an effort is eminently worthwhile but it cannot be made in a vacuum. It can succeed best if simultaneous efforts are also made to create a more homogeneous and egalitarian social order which assures at least basic minimum standards of living to all.