

A note on non-formal educational initiatives

by **Dhrupad Mathur**, India

Education entails a continuous, lifelong process of knowing, learning, discovering and transforming individuals, institutions and society. Primary education therefore is all the more important as it is a vital foundation that paves way for this lifetime experience.

In majority of cases, the organized school education system chases a target with a set pattern of knowing, learning and discovering things. Operationally, that's the easiest (probably effective) way to train minds and create a certain degree of capability. While the traditional systems have their success stories, there are numerous examples of people that were never exposed to traditional education systems or had limited exposure to formal education and have contributed far more significantly to the society. So, what is the underlying phenomenon?

With exposure to development programs and a consulting background, I have been in the higher education sector, and I have experienced that a major portion of content delivered via the traditional education systems is generally of very limited direct use. Yes, it does create a certain level of sensitization and perhaps prepares the mind to handle altogether different situations.

So the bottom line is that the education is all about transformation of minds. And if it is so, then the formal methods will always have a limited sustained applicability. Though there have been profound experiments and pedagogical innovations resulting in the development of new approaches and experiential learning etc. but are we addressing the underlying phenomenon correctly?

Human beings are unique individuals and have unique capabilities to develop and contribute in different ways. We have to think whether the straitjacketed approach practiced through the traditional education systems is detrimental to the proliferation of this uniqueness? Perhaps yes.

Let me use a metaphor here: We all know the difference between a "Farm" and a "Forest". Organized education systems are like farms, fields that will produce a certain variety, fit for mass consumption while we know that existence of "Forests" is more important for biodiversity and sustainable development. The biggest difference here is that one is man-made another one is generally natural. Same applies to the education sector. How can we imbibe the natural character in education?

Every pupil has a seed within, which is different, like the varieties in a forest. But through the organized education we treat them like a "farm" by giving prescriptions of knowledge and inhibiting self-discovery, and then we don't even know how many of those seeds have become inane because of this systematic treatment. So, farming culture in education may not take us anywhere and Non-formal educational initiatives therefore will hold the key for future.

The challenge however lies in conceptualizing, developing, propagating and sustaining non-formal education practices. But I do hope that after we cross the initial threshold of general social inertia and with demonstrated outcomes this can be achieved prominently in near future. Lastly, the commitment from education practitioners will be of utmost importance towards this transformational journey.

—