

Community Participation in Non-Formal Education

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This article discusses the concept of community participation and its different interpretations. It also examines the changes taking place in society and the new demand for community education, with examples drawn from my own community. Underlying this new demand are important features such as 'partnership', 'collective action' and 'empowerment'. Finally, the article highlights the process of participation as it is encouraged in non-formal education, and concludes with the importance of quality information in non-formal education programmes and projects.

Introduction

Since the inception of the term 'non-formal education' a great number of relatively new concepts have also emerged and are associated with it. Terms such as 'community empowerment', 'community involvement', 'community participation', and others of similar kind have gained acceptability in the field of non-formal education.

Also existing is a proliferation of approaches and methodologies pertaining to participation. 'Organising the masses', 'action-oriented', 'people's power' are phrases that have become so popular that there might be a danger of their being loosely defined or losing any legitimate meaning. Concern has also been raised that definitions of 'participation' may be popularised by the educated elite. However, in spite of the concerns raised, serious attempts have been made in applying these concepts, particularly 'community participation' in non-formal education projects and programmes.

Clarifying the Concepts

The term 'community' is used in a variety of social situations. It is recognised that there are different academic definitions and interpretations for the term. For the purpose of this paper, 'community' refers to a group of people living together in an area with a high degree of face-to-face contact and sharing values, beliefs, problems and resources.

The term 'participation' as proposed by Bagnall (1989) is a continuum, operating from more than mere presence at an activity to full control of decision-making through several stages of active involvement. 'Presence' implies only that the learner is attending the programme. The interests of the learners are not necessarily taken into account. The learners may be entirely passive. 'Involvement' is when the learners, either individually or as a group, interact with other learners or the facilitators. 'Control' is the degree of the learner's control of the content, aims, objectives and outcome of non-formal education.

'Participation' for the purpose of this article is explained as the process in which those involved in non-formal education projects or programmes are involved in the decision-making process from the beginning to the evaluation stage. Non-formal education is any educational learning activity organised outside the formal system, although it can use the school facilities for its programmes.

'Community participation' is interpreted differently by different people. Some

people support the concept of 'community participation' because they believe that a programme looks better and is justified if the people are involved in it. For others, it is a practical consideration; they feel that a programme is more likely to be understood if people are involved in it. Some people regard community participation to be important because people's involvement and assistance reduces programme and project costs, while for others it is a political tool to assist the 'victims' of urban deprivation in acquiring their share of services and resources available. The varied interpretations offered to the term 'community participation' are prompted by different motivations; they present paradoxes, promises and frustrations to those who have to translate them into practice.

According to Baquer (1983), community participation is not a new concept. It underlines the acceptance of democratic principles and practices. Those who subscribe to democracy emphasise participation in all aspects of public activities. Some elites who believed that the majority was inherently incompetent accepted some form of representative democracy. The powerful, the influential, the educated and the rich, however, still believe, to some extent, that they possess the wisdom to make decisions on behalf of others. Many of them reject 'community participation', openly or privately, and sometimes they succeed in destroying it or reducing it to a meaningless slogan.

It has to be recognised that a fundamental cultural change is already taking place throughout the world. It is the crisis in authority. The change is discernible in most social institutions, such as the family, the church, the community and the government. The old arrangement of command and obedience has changed. There is now a

demand for consultation and dialogue at every level of human involvement. Community participation was accepted well before this change took place. However, the trend was always for the community to participate at the implementation stage of projects. This has proven to result in disempowerment and project failure.

An example which illustrates such a failure occurred in my own community. The people were summoned to a village meeting to discuss the planting of cocoa as a source of income for the community. It was facilitated by the local agricultural officer and representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture. There was a lot of enthusiasm and excitement about the project because of the promise of some income to meet their financial needs. The community members co-operated in clearing the land and planting. A lot of virgin land was used and the Ministry of Agriculture provided seedlings and advice. However, when it was time for harvesting, it was realised that there was no market for the produce. While some cocoa pods were sold at the local market, much of the crop rotted on the trees. To the community, the project had failed; they did not generate much income. On the other hand, we could say that the project had encouraged the use of unused land, the strengthening of communal work and the awareness that unused tribal land could be developed to generate additional income to the community. However, the fact remained that the project was not fully discussed before it was implemented. Getting all the information and the involvement of the community at every stage was very important. As the agricultural officer was stationed in the community, one would have thought that he would have had more insight in how to involve the community in the whole process of development. As this did not occur, it could only be assumed that the officer lacked

awareness and understanding of the new approach to community participation. The community had been involved only in the implementation, not the planning.

The demand now is for community participation at all stages of a project; that is, from its formulation to the stage of assessment of its impact. This approach is being popularised and is gaining support, but its supporters sometimes have opposing perspectives in terms of strategies used to achieve their aims. These range from direct confrontations with the establishment to finding peaceful and evolutionary methods of bringing about the desired change.

The essence of community participation emphasised in non-formal education is one of self-development through mutual development. Such self-development can be achieved through peaceful means, such as collective exercises of learning to solve common problems through shared opportunities. If the activities of a community do not meet the approval of the authorities, its members are regarded as troublemakers and politically motivated agitators. Consensus strategies, which enable members of a community to cope with their problems, are preferable. There should be opportunities to assist professionals in bureaucracies to become more efficient and effective in their work. As bureaucrats and members of the community interact with each other, co-operative methods of negotiation and action are better than a 'top down' approach.

Partnership

The most important condition for community participation is that all parties enter into consultation about their common problems.

It is only when all the participants develop a capacity to join hands with each other, and actually do so to tackle common problems, that community participation becomes meaningful. The exercise of the concept of partnership is important in that it minimises dependency and welfare mentality.

The experience of my own community, Vugalei, can again be used as an example of the benefits of partnership. The community members, with my support, have learned from their past failures and are now working closely with outside agencies for the development of the community. They have been made to realise that they are to contribute to their own community development. Working closely with Telecommunications Services, the village now has a public telephone in the community hall. They are now able not only to communicate with their relatives anywhere but also with hospitals in emergencies.

In addition, recently, I have had contact with the Rural Electrification Unit. They have met with community members several times and discussed their need for electricity. The village had to contribute some funds towards the cost. Through regular meetings with government officials and our own fundraising drives, the community has been able to raise their contribution, and electricity will soon be brought to the village.

One of the assumptions underlying the suggestion for increased community participation in non-formal education is that the disadvantaged are powerless and cannot bargain for the protection of their interests. Another assumption is that providers of services are largely unresponsive to the needs of this group. Community participation as a social process is, therefore, aimed at

assisting these groups to clarify and express their needs, and to take collective action in meeting these needs. This can only eventuate if there is real partnership in the process. The concept of partnership emphasises that both the community members and the providers have a role to play in the collective action.

If the rationale behind community participation is to enable those at the fringes of society to acquire insights into their problems, needs and resources, it should also aim at assisting the providers to acquire a community oriented attitude of mind. In the case of my community, they have been able to address their identified needs through partnership with the providers of services. Another important aspect is the provision of clear information to the community of exactly how they are to participate; what is to be their contribution.

Process of Participation

In most developing nations, development programmes are centrally planned and community members often find it difficult to articulate their needs and problems. When this occurs, community participation in development programmes becomes a subtle form of social control and maintenance.

In non-formal education, movement from dependency to control is fundamental to self-learning and self-realisation and, ultimately, to empowerment of individuals in the community. The active participation of the community in the decision-making and planning of their non-formal education programmes is highly emphasised. Community participation cannot be imposed by administrative devices, nor by well-meaning declarations of intent, nor by seminars recommending it. Its success depends on a clear appreciation of its aims and processes. Those promoting community

participation should make every effort to create the right climate of understanding, which should be sincere and humane. It can be achieved through programmes of action that bring together all parties so that both formal and informal channels of communication are open.

Participatory exercises should not be undertaken in conditions of crisis. Faith in participatory approaches comes of free will and is learned by actually collaborating with others, particularly with those who face similar problems. Participatory action facilitates the sharing of pertinent information by all interested parties. An effective information system is capable of solving operational problems, monitoring activities and evaluating the results of all efforts. The people in my community were clearly provided with the information of how they were to contribute in the process of achieving their needs: the public telephone and electricity.

The acceptance of the concept of participation is a step towards sharing power. In order to share power, the participants must first share information with all the stakeholders. Participation in the sharing of information depends on the genuine motivation to do so. The information should be sufficient to describe a given situation and should enable the participants to plan actions to deal with the situation. The information upon which participation can proceed should be acceptable and reliable.

Conclusion

Non-formal education projects aimed at promoting community participation deal with people, their problems and aspirations, their weaknesses and strengths. There is a need for action, but action without correct

information can be misleading or harmful. Efficiency in solving problems depends on the quality of information. If we accept participation as the key word and guiding force, then information should be of practical use to all participants. Information is not only that which is provided by the service providers but also by the community members themselves in terms of their needs and problems. In order to solicit the right information, both the providers and the community members must recognise that they are partners, and sharing and using quality information will be of mutual benefit.

References

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