Social Acceptability of Non-Formal Education in India

Fatima Islahi and Nasrin

ABSTRACT

Non-formal education provides a viable alternative to meet the educational needs of people who, for certain reasons, are not in a position to avail the opportunities provided by the formal education system. As per the literature, there is a general perception that people have a negative attitude towards such a mode of education. For a successful application of a non-formal education program, it is important to determine and evaluate the social acceptance of such programs as regardless of its advantages, it will not be adopted and sustained by the people if there is no social acceptance. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the social acceptability of non-formal education. Data was collected through structured interviews on a sample of 200 pass-outs. The findings reveal that these non-formal programs have great acceptability, at least amongst the people who are known to the participants, which may be due to the fact that participation and the perception of such programs are linked. The study recommends NFE programs be promoted and success stories publicised amongst the non-participants of NFE for bringing about a change in general perception.

Keywords: Non-Formal Education, Skill Development, Social Acceptability

I. INTRODUCTION

Formal education refers to a hierarchically structured education system that runs from kindergarten through university and is distinguished by its uniformity at each level. Non-formal education (henceforth NFE), on the other hand, is an umbrella term for any scheme of education or training that systematically removes this barrier of uniformity, whether they are concerned with age, time, place or space. It provides a viable alternative to meet the educational needs of people who, for certain reasons, are not in a position to avail the opportunities provided by the formal education system. Individuals themselves take responsibility for what, how and where they learn and works best for matured, motivated, well organized and already accomplished learners.

Initially, in India, Non-formal education used to be equated with basic reading, writing and numeracy skills (Mitra, 2007). However, there has been an increased recognition of the diversity of NFE in terms of types of programmes, purposes and beneficiary groups. NFE now provides a plethora of opportunities in a variety of fields encompassing agriculture, health, skill development, personal growth, literacy training, cultural practices, environment and microfinance, along with several others. Far from being ‘supplementary education’ or ‘extracurricular activities’, NFE has developed into a worldwide educational industry reaching diverse audiences (Romi & Schmida, 2009). There are, of course, many complex reasons for the widespread-renewed interest in NFE.

One factor can be the realisation that formal education is no longer capable of satisfying a whole series of increasingly diversified educational needs, and a one-size-fits-all education system cannot meet the needs of increasingly complex and fluid societies that are seeking alternative educational systems. There is also a strong recognition among governments and international technical and funding agencies that national development will be severely impeded without bringing out-of-school youth and adults into the process through meaningful non-formal programmes.

Recent developments in the field of information and communication technology (ICT) have expanded the possibilities for non-institutionalised learning opportunities in an unprecedented manner, transforming the world into a borderless educational arena. NFE has become more interactive, flexible, collaborative, and participative, with more agencies and opportunities to develop new skills (Ito et al., 2013). The beauty and the strength of NFE is that it is able to adapt itself with changing educational needs of society. Changing demographics, changing work and social patterns, declining funds for education by the government, competition in the educational market, rising cost of living, tightening of national funds, along with several others. Far from being ‘supplementary education’ or ‘extracurricular activities’, NFE has developed into a worldwide educational industry reaching diverse audiences (Romi & Schmida, 2009). There are, of course, many complex reasons for the widespread-renewed interest in NFE.

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II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Government of India is focusing more on skill and entrepreneurship development among the working masses. Strong awareness initiatives coupled with robust implementation through NFE programmes can deliver the desired results. Making such programmes successful is need of the hour in a country where a huge number of youth and the working population look forward to get a job or start an economically viable business. India enjoys the demographic advantage of having over 50% of its population below the age of 25. As per available data, by 2030, the country will have the world’s youngest and largest workforce, exceeding one billion, and this working-age population will continue to be far in excess of those dependent on them till 2040. The demographic window of opportunity available to India is a potential source of strength for the national economy that would make India the skill capital of the world. Therefore, from the individual as well as societal perspectives, the relevance of skill development is increasing. The country would not be able to reap the demographic dividend unless we are able to equip and continuously upgrade the skills of the population in the working-age group.

Sadly, at present, India has the lowest proportion of trained youth in the world. Eighty percent of new entrants to the workforce have no opportunity for skill training. According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO), India is likely to face a shortage of approximately 29 million skilled personnel by 2030. Following this, Accenture in 2019 predicted that if India does not take timely actions, the skill deficit could cost the country US$ 1.97 trillion in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) over the next decade. Non-formal vocational training helps to increase access to creating self-employment opportunities, enhance competitiveness, improve the quality of small-scale industrial products, increase income, improve the livelihood of target groups, and finally contribute to the overall poverty reduction and sustainable development in India. The government of India has introduced numerous key schemes through its ‘Skill India Mission’ programmes like Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana (PMKVY), Jan Shikshan Sansthan (JSS) National Apprenticeship Promotion Scheme (NAPS), Skills Acquisition and Knowledge Awareness for Livelihood Promotion (SANKALP), NaiManzil, USTTAD, NaiRoshni, MANAS etc. to develop vocational skills through non-formal methods. These programs are open to all sections of society, especially the underprivileged and weaker sections across India, to ensure that no one is left behind and everyone is provided with equal opportunity to develop vocational skills. However, despite important efforts made by governments, a massive proportion of the youth and working population of the country are unable to utilize the benefits of education and training sector for significant development of knowledge and skill, which can transform them into an employable human resource. Any program cannot be considered ‘sustainable’ in the full sense if they are not acceptable to people. Acceptability is a product of “complex forces that come from within individuals themselves and from the social context within which they participate” (Shindler et al., 2002). Thus, it is contingent on the program’s relevance to a person/group, knowledge and understanding of alternatives and consequences, comparative assessment of options and the degree to which it is perceived as fair, reasonable, appropriate, and non-intrusive. Experts contend that measuring and reporting social acceptability in published research is a necessary component of quality research (Horner et al., 2005). Social acceptability is thought to inform the potential for the dissemination of any intervention. Without a better understanding of social acceptability, the government may develop non-formal interventions that are effective when implemented within a rigorous design, but regardless of their scientific basis or economic advantages, will not be adopted and sustained by the people of India if there is no social acceptance. For a successful application of non-formal education, it is important to determine and evaluate the social acceptability of such programs. A low level of social acceptability should be of great concern to policymakers as it is indicative of the fact that there exists a major hurdle in its adoption. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the social acceptability of non-formal education in India.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Population and Sample

The target population for this study were women pass-outs of non-formal education programs in Aligarh, where skills are imparted. Jan Shikshan Sansthan was chosen for the study where 200 women participants enrolled and completed a course from the non-formal centres were selected as a sample. Sample was selected through the “Non-Probability Convenience” sampling method.

B. Tool Used

Demographic sheet was used to collect the personal details of the respondents. To measure the acceptability of society towards non-formal education, a “Social Acceptability Scale” that was developed by the researcher was used. The scale has 6 items, of which 3 are positive and 3 are negative items. The items are measured by using a 3-point Likert scale. The scheme of scoring response categories involved differential weighting such that the response category, ‘Majority disagree’ was given a weight of 1, ‘Some agree, and some disagree’ weight of 2 and ‘Majority agree’ weight of 3, in respect of responses pertaining to positive statements. The polarity of the negative questions in the scale was reversed. Marks according to the positive and negative statements were given on all the items. The sum of these values gave the score for the subject. The score of the scale varies from 6 to 18 and can be interpreted as higher the score, higher the social acceptability of NFE. The reliability coefficient for the tool calculated through Cronbach alpha was found to be 0.72 at 0.001 level of significance. The results of KMO value of the analysis, which was 0.78, and the Bartlett test, which was statistically significant ($\chi^2=211.50$, $df=15$, $p<0.001$), supported the validity of the factor analysis usage for this study. Exploratory Factor Analysis with principal component analysis as extraction and varimax as rotation was performed on the data obtained. One factor emerged in the analysis, all the items representing social acceptability as a single dimension.
C. Collection of Data

Social Acceptability Scale, along with the Personal Data Sheet, served as the foundation for developing an interview schedule. Data was collected through structured interviews in the local language Hindi. During data collection, the interviewer introduced herself to each respondent, briefed her about the purpose of the study and sought 15 minutes of her time to conduct the interview. The participants were given full assurance that the information gathered from them would be kept confidential and would be used for research purposes only and that the results would have no personal consequences against them. After receiving the consent, the interviews were conducted. There was no time limit to answer, but usually, subjects took about 10-15 minutes. Necessary instructions and clarifications, wherever required, were given for answering the questions. The data collected were subjected to suitable statistical tests for interpretation with the help of SPSS and Microsoft Excel.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To gain information regarding the acceptability of non-formal education by people, the beneficiaries were asked whether people affiliated with them consider studying in a non-formal institute as useful, to which a majority of 75% agreed while merely 6% disagreed. A similar trend of acceptability was reported by Riaz et al. (2014) in their study, where majority of rural women considered the skill development trainings as useful as it empowered them in certain areas such as decision making, self-reliance and confidence building. Different studies have reported NFE to play a significant role in not only educational but also economic as well as physical and mental health prospects. Studies report a change in self-confidence and perception about self, and significant gain in general knowledge as well as a positive change in self-esteem with access to non-formal education (Konantumbigi et al., 2008). It can also help in the development of active citizenship, empowerment, and the preservation of culture (Ličen et al., 2012).

It is noteworthy, however, that only 55% of students of NFE claimed that the people acquainted with them consider the skills acquired by the non-formal students are adequate enough to become employed/self-employed. Although many people consider NFE to be useful but not as much consider it to be adequate enough to get employed/self-employed. This may be due to the fact that India is going through a job crisis, where unemployment rate is now at 8.1%, according to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), which is way higher than anything seen in India at least over the last three decade. Also, employment by education level has gone down from 20.08 crore in 2004 to 14.2 crore in 2017, and the share of those employed has gone down from 48.77 per cent in 2004 to 31.09 per cent in 2017. Further, the estimated youth unemployment rate is almost three times the overall rate of unemployment. These empirical observations are further buttressed by the anecdotal evidence that tens of thousands of young people, including engineers and MBAs, are applying for a few low-skilled government jobs like peons, guards, drivers etc. People are not able to get a job according to their ability and skill. Highly skilled workers are finding the going tough. So people are disappointed and have accepted that work opportunities do not come easy.

There is a general notion that such courses are for individuals who are unintelligent and underachievers (Ayonmike, 2014; Dokubo & Dokubo, 2013; Minna-Eyovwunu et al., 2020). Different studies report that it is one of the factors that discourage people from taking up such courses (Addison, 2008; Ambag & Bernarte, 2015; Dike, 2009; Edoka et al., 2015; Muoghalu, 2018). However, in this study, Table I informs us that 71% were of the view that people around them disagreed with the idea that non-formal education is meant for the dull and unintelligent. This cannot be termed as an exception as other studies (Adewale et al., 2018) also report that society, in general, does not agree with the idea that education outside the formal system is for the less intelligent. Rose (2005) is of the view that students outside the formal education track aren’t any less intelligent or less capable than their liberal arts peers; rather, they simply have a different set of interests, talents and skills. For these students, a traditional college degree is not the right path. It is just that they do not thrive in lecture settings, memorizing and repeating data for exams.

### Table I: Social Acceptability and Non-Formal Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item No.</th>
<th>People around you consider Non-formal education…</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Majority Agree</th>
<th>Some Agree</th>
<th>Some Disagree</th>
<th>Majority Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>…as useful</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>…not enough to get employed/self-employed.</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>…for the dull and unintelligent.</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>0.81</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>…wastage of time.</td>
<td>2.34</td>
<td>0.87</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
<td>61.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>…a better alternative to those who cannot afford formal education in terms of time or money.</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>16.5%</td>
<td>18.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>…to enrol themselves or recommend others.</td>
<td>2.39</td>
<td>0.82</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although the purposes, goals, curricula, as well as performance expectations of NFE are different from the formal education, only 27% students of NFE felt that their acquaints consider non-formal education as a waste of time which is in contrast to the findings of other studies (Ayonmike, 2014). This is an indication that the majority are aware of the importance of skills and knowledge imparted by the non-formal programs.

The success of the NFE institutes lies in their ability to extend educational opportunities to all, including the unreached, disadvantaged, underprivileged and the community as a whole, thereby contributing to the manpower development and growth. It is also quite reassuring that majority of the people have a belief that non-
formal education is a viable alternative. A good 65% acknowledge that people around them consider non-formal education to provide a better alternative to those who cannot afford formal education in terms of time or money.

Another encouraging finding from this study was that the acceptance is to the extent where 61% of the participants claimed that majority of the people who know are willing to enrol themselves or recommend others to enrol in a non-formal institute and take the benefit of the program. This is corroborated by Kapur (2021), who reports in her study that the majority of the participants that joined the non-formal skill development program got to know about it from their friends and family, while Babu (2013) and Sharma (2019) also mention that the majority of participants in their study were motivated to join these type of programs by friends and family.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE II: PERCENTAGE OF DIFFERENT LEVELS OF SOCIAL ACCEPTABILITY</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Levels Of Social Acceptability Of Non-Formal Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Any education or training programme gains social acceptability when its outcomes are recognised as valuable and integrated into the larger social system. As evident from the above Table II, it was found that merely 7.5% of the respondents reported a low level of acceptability of non-formal education by the majority of the people around them, while 34.5% of them were of the view that they knew an approximately equal number of people some were having a positive outlook while others were having a negative outlook towards non-formal education. In contrast to the general perception, the majority (58%) felt that most of the people around them had a positive attitude towards non-formal education. Literature is replete with the statements of non-formal programs having low acceptability in society. This may be due to the fact that authors of such statements come from a formal background who often compare the quality of employment and earnings of formally trained individuals and individuals trained from a non-formal program without giving due consideration to socioeconomic and psychological conditions and aspirational determinations of the candidates getting trained through these modes of education, hence have a biased outlook towards such programs, and their biasness comes out in their writings. NFE programs actually provide a ray of hope to those who neither have the educational qualifications nor the financial resources to pursue any other opportunities and would otherwise remain stuck in a vicious circle of ignorance and inequality. These non-formal programs have great acceptance, at least amongst the acquaints of the participants, which may be due to the fact that participation and the perception of such programs are linked. People who have less regard for NFE, might have no exposure to what NFE is, and so they do not know its value or have a proper understanding of its contribution. This finding is supported by a Moroccan study where levels of satisfaction with NFE programs among households with a participant were high as compared to those households who did not have a participant of NFE (USAID, 2018).

Another more recent factor that might have enhanced its acceptability is the closure of educational institutions owing to COVID-19 pandemic when educators were compelled to explore and implement alternative methods that included non-formal pedagogical strategies to ensure continuity of education. People have been exposed to diverse technologies and applications that contributed to the rapid and widespread adoption of non-formal methods and as a consequence may have realised that effective education can also be possible through non-formal means.

V. SUGGESTIONS

In light of the above discussion, several suggestions are given to foster the social acceptability of NFE

1. NFE programs should advertise their skill-based courses so that there is more visibility and awareness of the courses that these non-formal training centres offer.

2. Social networking platforms and mass media may be used to popularise these programs, and myths, as well as misconceptions regarding such courses, can be removed by using these platforms creatively.

3. These non-formal institutes should not just focus only on training but at the same time should make efforts for tie-ups and strategic alliances with different companies in terms of enhancing the curriculum as well as for internships and placements. The practicality and utility of these programs to the world of work can enhance the social acceptability by leaps and bounds.

4. Success stories may be popularised and shared to make these programs aspirational. Former successful students may be invited for interaction. This will help the current students to get a role model and be inspired.

5. More NFE centres are opened catering to different sections of society.

6. Gender sensitisation programmes and other awareness programmes on relevant issues such as health and wellbeing should be held on a regular basis at the centre, and these programmes should be blended with the centre’s activities. Such exercise could have a strong and noticeable impact on social perception about NFE programmes by the visitors who could experience in real-time the type of skills and knowledge being imparted. A significant positive change in social acceptability of NFE programmes could be realised, which is an essential aspect to exploit maximum benefits of NFE based training.

VI. CONCLUSION

Non-formal education has never received equal social acceptance as that of formal education, especially in terms of gaining knowledge and developing skills sufficient to get employed. Over the years, an increasing number of formally educated youth have been considered unsuitable for employment on account of being unskilled or poorly skilled and lacking sufficient desirable knowledge. In such a scenario, NFE programs have gradually started getting social acceptance in equipping the youth across all educational/ economic/ social strata to develop required skills that may help them in getting employment. As evident in the present study, in contrast with the general perception, NFE has got

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quite significant social acceptance in terms of society’s perception of its usefulness, employability, denying to rate it for dull and unintelligent, not being a waste of time, being economical and affordable and willingness to recommend NFE to the potential candidates.

Since acceptability is temporary (Shindler et al., 2002) and could be reshaped by the presence/absence of enabling and reinforcing processes, the challenge of achieving social acceptability will require continuous effort on the part of agencies with changing contexts, conditions, and populations. It may be suggested that if (i) NFE programs are popularized through diverse innovative strategies, (ii) more NFE centres are opened catering to different sections of the society, and (iii) tailor-made but robust programs are introduced to infuse desirable skills and work ethics, then not only social acceptability of NFE will further increase, but its reach will be even to the candidates who are acquiring formal education but lack suitable skills desired for getting employment. As there is not just one path to prosperity, so it is important to stop looking at formal education as a solution to finding rewarding careers. It’s also time to recognize that various forms of education will provide with the skills needed to find long-term, meaningful work. We cannot afford to let this stigma against NFE thwart attempts in rebuilding our ability to train young people, or we risk losing out in the new global economy.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

Authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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