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UNITED NATIONS EDUCATIONAL,
SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ORGANIZATION
ADMINISTRATIVE COMMITTEE ON CO-ORDINATION
WORKING GROUP ON COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Working Paper

on

The Definition of Fundamental Education

The term "Fundamental Education" was adopted by Unesco at the first session of its General Conference in 1946 and has since been widely, if rather loosely, used throughout the world. It is translated into French as "Education de Base" and into Spanish as "Educacion Fundamental".

At the same time it has many equivalents in English. "Mass Education" is widely used in Non-Self-Governing Territories under British Administration. "Social Education" is used in India (where "Basic Education" is applied, in distinction, to a new type of active primary schooling for children). "Community Education" is sometimes found in the United States of America.

It is not the purpose of Unesco to impose uniform terminology or standard definitions, nor should a healthy diversity of aims and practices be discouraged - none the less the following definition of fundamental education, as understood by Unesco, (1) may serve as a useful point of departure.

'Fundamental Education' is that kind of education which aims to help children and adults who do not have the advantages of formal schooling, to understand the problems of their environment and their rights and duties as citizens and individuals, to acquire essential knowledge and skill for the progressive improvement of their living conditions and to participate effectively in the economic and social development of their community, making full use of facilities and techniques brought to the community from outside.

"It is fundamental in the sense that it gives knowledge and skills which are an essential condition for attaining a higher standard of living. It lays the first foundations of education for those who have never been to school. It provides a basis for the effective use of technical services in agriculture, health, crafts and similar skilled occupations.

It is education - and this is sometimes ignored where the purpose is to achieve physical improvements - because it is essentially a process of communicating ideas and skills - because it works through the minds of people, and not by direct impact on their environments or on their bodies. So it will include, for example, mechanical developments by outside agencies (unless these are directly educative), or the provision of rural credit or curative medical treatment, though it may help to get these developments accepted and effectively used.

(1) This definition is suggested as a variant of the "official" definition of Fundamental Education. It should be noted, however, that any change in this definition would require approval by the Executive Board and General Conference of Unesco.

It focuses interest both on practical problems in the immediate environment and on wider sources of inspiration; in this way it seeks to develop not only individual and social life, but also an appreciation of values and a sense of the cultural and moral solidarity of mankind.

It is concerned with children for whom there is no adequate system of primary schooling and with adults deprived of educational opportunity; it is therefore primarily operative in those areas of the world (which are to be found to a greater or lesser extent in every continent and in most countries), where the vicious circle of illiteracy, disease and poverty limits the possibility of human progress - namely, the economically underdeveloped areas."

Methods and Media

Fundamental Education, like all good education, employs active methods, aiming to develop interest in learning and the desire to acquire and apply new knowledge, to encourage original and individual thought, constructively critical judgment and progressive development of the personality, rather than to form habits or to inculcate formalized knowledge and stereotyped ways of thinking and acting. Knowledge and skills are not taught for their own sake only but as a means of developing the power of learning, enriching the life of the individual in society and assisting him to adjust to a changing environment. It is, therefore, training for democracy and for the consciously directed development of society.

It uses, naturally, all available media of communication - the spoken word, the visual image and, as literacy develops, the written word. It seeks to amplify their effect, where this is practicable and desirable, by the use of appropriate mass communication media - films the press, radio broadcasts and possibly television.

Content

While the whole range of human activity provides the potential subject matter for fundamental education, each particular programme should give first attention to the most pressing needs and problems of the community concerned. Its content, therefore, varies widely with circumstances, but may eventually include:

skills of thinking and communicating (reading and writing, speaking, listening and calculation, combined with the development of understanding and balanced critical faculties);

elementary vocational skills (e.g.: in agriculture, horticulture and husbandry, building, weaving and other useful crafts, and simple technical and commercial skills necessary for economic progress);

domestic skills (such as the preparation of food and the care of children and the sick);

skills used in self expression and in the arts and crafts;

education for health through personal and community hygiene;

knowledge and understanding of the physical environment and of natural processes (for example, simple and practical science);

knowledge and understanding of the human environment (economic and social organization, law and government);

knowledge of other parts of the world and the people who live in them;

the development of qualities to fit men to live in the modern world; such as personal judgement and initiative, freedom from fear and superstition, sympathy and understanding for different points of view;

spiritual and moral development; belief in ethical ideals and values and the habit of acting upon them; with the duty to examine traditional standards of behaviour and to modify them to suit new conditions.

The Relationship of Fundamental Education with other Forms of Education

Adult Education

A large part of Fundamental Education is "adult education" in the strict sense that it is concerned with adults. It is however, in two directions, narrower than "adult education". In the first place it is concerned only with those adults who "do not have the advantages of formal schooling" (either never having been to school, or having lost what they acquired at school by living in a functionally illiterate society); secondly, it stops short of the "further education" of adults beyond the essential minimum of knowledge and skill required as a foundation for effective living. (The more advanced types of adult education, offered, for example, by a University Extension Service, lie outside the scope of fundamental education, though they may well lead the educated members of the community to turn their attention to fundamental education - as educators - through the study of community problems). In one direction also, fundamental education is wider than adult education, in that it includes in certain circumstances educational activities for children.

The Primary School

Fundamental Education is, by Unesco's definition, contrasted with formal schooling and does not, therefore, include the establishment, operation or improvement of a primary school system.⁽¹⁾ Where there are no primary schools, or where these are inadequate to accommodate all children of school age, the educational activities for children - including simple literacy classes to teach the 3Rs - clubs and recreational projects - may then be a feature of a fundamental education programme.

The primary school teacher, also, is more and more being asked, trained and sometimes paid, to carry on fundamental education for those who are not enrolled in his school, whether children or adults or both. Further discussion of the employment of school teachers as agents of fundamental education in their communities and of the "community school" movement, which brings formal education and fundamental education into a very close relationship, will be included in a later section of this document.

Finally it is impossible to escape the fact that in economically underdeveloped areas there is inevitably some competition for limited staff and funds between

(1) This was not clearly established in earlier publications on Fundamental Education, or in projects undertaken previous to the General Conference definition.

fundamental education and the formal education system. At its worst this competition may develop into a direct conflict between two more or less opposing policies for the solution of the problem of illiteracy and economic underdevelopment. In one camp are those who contend that there is no substitute for a system of universal and compulsory primary schooling as a means of achieving widespread literacy, nor for technical and vocational schools and teacher training institutions to raise productivity and to staff the primary school system. Where sufficient funds are not available for these purposes, they argue, no diversion of resources should be allowed to flow into fundamental education. In the other camp are those whose purpose it is to raise the living standards of the present generation to bring the national economy up to a reasonable state of development and stability within a quarter of a century and who believe that the adult population must be mobilized and that fundamental education can and must provide an emergency, remedial education service for this purpose. They argue, moreover, that there is a moral duty to combat illiteracy and ignorance by every means and that if the present generation remains illiterate, the children coming out of the primary schools into illiterate societies will soon relapse into illiteracy.

Secondary and Higher Education

A fundamental education movement is often dependent for its teachers and leaders upon the secondary schools and universities, sometimes outside the area of its operations. University extension activities, as already suggested, may also play a part in such a movement.

Technical and Vocational Training

Fundamental education seeks to bring to the service of the individual and the community the essential understanding and rudimentary skills which are basis to a full and effective life in a particular environment. Fundamental education would not include an organized programme of vocational and technical training. It may, however, depend upon such a programme for the formation of its specialized field workers and leaders.

Fundamental education is often an essential first step to vocational and technical training. It fosters the assimilation of simple techniques and ideas and assists the adoption of better practices in agricultural production, in the use of natural resources, in home life and in hygiene and sanitation. In rural areas it may lead to the introduction or improvement of useful crafts and small industries; in industrial areas it may provide a basis for acceptance of improved methods of production.

These tasks bring it into relationship with various technical services, especially in agriculture, health, home economics and crafts and small industries within the broader pattern of social and economic development.

The Relationship of Fundamental Education with other services of Social and Economic Development

Social and Economic Development

Fundamental education may in fact be described as an educational service of social and economic development. This is using the term social and economic development in the widest sense, to include the sum total of purposive creative activity that man brings to bear on the organization of his society and on the use and improvement of his physical environment. It would also, in the widest sense,

include the development of the individual to play a constructive part in this activity and to adjust himself to his constantly changing social and physical conditions. This is, of course, a special concern of fundamental education.

Community Development

The term Community Development (1) is widely used, but in a somewhat more restricted sense, to describe "the processes by which local communities can raise their own standards of living". (1)

Various Services

The process of social and economic development naturally demands, and includes, the provision of technical and social services - generally by government intervention, sometimes by private organizations. These services may, for example, be concerned with local government and administration, public security, communications and public works, water supply, marketing, co-operative organization, provision of credit and capital, development of crafts and industries, agricultural advice and extension, health and medical services and education (both formal schooling and informal fundamental and adult education). The ideal is that such services should eventually be available, either within the local community or within reach of it, to all members of the society. It is, however, a very general symptom of 'under-development' that they are non-existent, or so rudimentary that they effect the lives of a very few, [or sometimes, and worse still, so disorganized and incompetent that they create more confusion than development and are regarded as a nuisance or an imposition by most members of the society].

Where such services do not exist, therefore, or are largely ineffective, fundamental education may provide an appropriate first stage of development - an initial conscious effort to awaken the minds of the people to their problems and potentialities, and to give them elementary knowledge and skill to solve their problems and to realize their potentialities. In this case it may be the 'spearhead' of social and economic development or community development - a single service initiating development by wholly educational means. It is in such cases only that the term 'Fundamental Education Project' should be used.

Agents of Fundamental Education

The agents of such fundamental education in the communities may be: adult literacy teachers trained for community education, community school (2) teachers, multi-purpose field workers, or they may be fundamental education teams, combined units or cultural missions in which persons with perhaps rudimentary training in appropriate specialized fields operate in single communities or wider areas.

They will aim to introduce to the people new ideas and essential knowledge and skills, based upon their needs. These will include generally the teaching

(1) see separate definitions by the United Nations.

(2) Definition: 'Community School' = a primary school used as a centre for, and source of, adult and informal education in the community.

of reading and writing as a means of communication. These will also include elementary instruction or 'first aid' in agriculture, health, home economics, rural crafts and other subjects - for which the support of outside technical services will be required. Indeed when the fundamental education worker is drawn into these subjects he should generally call in the nearest expert and serve only as a channel for his technical advice to the people, for it is important that fundamental education should not overreach itself, either by trying to do things which are not education, (e.g. the direct provision of rural credit or curative medical treatment), or by trying to teach subjects in which the available field staff is not technically competent. As always fundamental education must be regarded as a temporary remedial measure, which should make itself unnecessary as soon as possible, giving place to permanent technical and social services.

As these other technical services - for example in agricultural extension and environmental sanitation, grow up, or where they already exist, fundamental education may take its place among them in a concerted programme of community development, or a large-scale social and economic development scheme. Then it may operate in more limited and specialized fields of activity such as the organization of an adult literacy programme, of public library service for new literates, or of mobile audio-visual projection units.

Operational Planning and Control and Administration of Fundamental Education

The remarks so far made apply to fundamental education by field workers in the communities - to the 'front-line' operations in the war against ignorance - to activities which have a direct impact on the minds and lives of the local people. These activities, however, demand what may be called operational planning and control - still in the field though behind the front line of community action. They also demand, still further back, a national or regional administration.

The operational control of an area project of fundamental education may be entrusted to a combined unit, consisting of a project director or organizer and a technical staff of four to six persons. This project staff may administer a number of teams or a still larger number of individual field workers. If the programme is designed to use fundamental education alone as the initial spearhead of rural development it may be administered by a special department or unit of the Ministry of Education. Where fundamental education is one of a number of specialized services, it must fit into whatever national scheme for planning and development may be established to co-ordinate these services. In any case it is important that all those concerned in the planning, organization and administration of projects, which use or include fundamental education, should be given the fullest possible understanding of its functions and techniques.

Supporting Services of Fundamental Education

Finally, in support of the field workers in the communities, fundamental education, as an education arm of social and economic development, has important technical services to provide. These supporting services may also be made available to field workers in other arms of the development programme, in illiterate or largely illiterate communities, e.g. agricultural extension, environmental sanitation or rural industrialization.

The supporting services in fundamental education may be categorized as:

- experimental study;
- training;
- producing educational materials.

They are closely related, and, while it may be possible to set up any one service without the others, to do so would deprive it of the mutual benefit which results, for example:

- when training is based on experimental study, and followed up by technical advisory services;
- when educational materials are produced and carefully tested in the field, through experimental study;
- when the production of materials goes hand in hand with the training of those who will use them, and is based on their needs.

These services can, therefore, generally be best provided by a fundamental education centre - whether regional or national. Further discussion of the services themselves and of the organization of fundamental education centres will be reserved for Part III.