



Nonformal Education in International Perspective: *The Problem of Definition*¹

Ted Ward

The word “education” is a constricting, convergent word. Learning is one of those words that “blows outward.” When bringing a group together to work on nonformal education, the worst place to begin is to try and define nonformal education—“because it picks up and tries to clarify and clean up a basically convergent word (education); and tries to warp it into a basically divergent frame of reference.”

If we want to start over again with educational designs, should we not start by asking how do we help people learn? The constricting qualities of formal education are that *teachers* have to create and *curriculum* has to facilitate.

The tendency is to assume that NFE is about method and to, therefore, set up a good guy/bad guy situation: NFE versus Formal at the level of method. The distinction between the modes is not a methodological distinction but a structural distinction—where it fits in society.

“To use formal education as change inducing function in society rarely works . . . that’s why the emphasis in international development has been on nonformal education.” Formal education tends to be the tool of the power hierarchy.

It is in the process of development itself that the need for NFE emerges. In the developed nations, more money is spent on NFE than on formal education. NFE is a need in a developing society and remains so in a developed society.

¹ Ted Ward. Nonformal Education in International Perspective. Excerpt from an address to the Religious Education Association, November 18-22, 1983. This excerpt is also included with this alternate title in order to draw attention to his comments on the problems of definition.