OPEN SCHOOLING: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

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Abstract

Every government in the world has an obligation to provide education to all its citizens, chiefly because education is not only a human right but is also a critical factor in economic development and poverty reduction. In particular basic (primary and secondary) education helps reduce poverty "by increasing the productivity of the poor, by reducing fertility and improving health and by equipping people with the skills they need to participate in the economy and in society". (World Bank, 1995: 1).

Many governments have developed a variety of strategies for developing education and training programmes. 1hese include experimentation with innovative approaches and technologies such as open and distance learning. In particular the challenge of implementing goals for universalisation of primary education and the need to increase access to secondary education has contributed to the development and expansion of open schooling.

This paper outlines the development of open schooling, describes examples of open schooling and discusses the role of open schooling in increasing access to quality basic education especially to out of school children.

Open schooling: Issues and challenges

Development of open schooling

As Phillips (1994) stated, open schooling means different things to different people but, in general, it "concerns using alternative and usually less resource-based approaches which characterise distance education methods and open learning, to deliver basic education and training" (p.149).

Mukhopadhyay (1994) traced the first open school programme to Australia where correspondence lessons were prepared at the request of a parent in Beech Forest in the Otway Mountains in 1914. Open schools were introduced in Canada in 1919 and in New Zealand in 1922.

In 1979 an Open School was established in India, as a project of the Central Board of Secondary Education, Delhi. It was upgraded in 1989 and became the National Open School, (NOS) which is an autonomous institution. According to Perraton (1992:10) "at secondary level, African distance teaching institutions have long experience of using correspondence courses, with some radio support and face-to-face guidance, for students outside school."

Open schools have now been established and have developed rapidly in many countries to cater for primary and secondary students. Some of them have very high enrolments. For example, the National Open School of India had a cumulative enrolment of 354,811 between 1992 and 1997(Gaba, 1997:44).

Examples of open schooling

The 1960s saw a massive expansion of distance education across many countries especially in higher education. During that period distance education at primary and secondary levels was confined to a few countries (Mukhopadhyay, 1994). Largely because of this, much of the literature on open and distance learning was, up to the turn of the 1990s, on distance higher education and less on open schooling. However, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) has since then played a leading role in disseminating information about the practice of open schooling particularly in the Commonwealth through its publications and workshop reports (See Mukhopadhyay and Phillips 1994).

As the case studies below show open schooling not only has different meanings but also is implemented in different ways, depending on the country in which it is located and the reasons for establishment. (Phillips, 1994)

<u>Open schooling in Australia</u>

Australia has one of the longest histories of open and distance learning in the Commonwealth. This has been well documented by Lugg 1994. Primary distance education started in 1914 when correspondence lessons were prepared in response to a parent who lived in Beech Forest in the Otway Mountains, West Melbourne. Because of other requests received and the success of the initial project, a special Correspondence Branch was established in Melbourne, in 1916. From that time primary and secondary distance education grew and spread to all other Australian states and territories by 1980.

By 1994 the Distance Education Centre was operating separately and administered primary and secondary schools, located in one centre in South Melbourne. At the end of 1993 the total primary enrolment was 301 students(250 full time and 51 adults taking basic literacy and numeracy programmes). During the same period secondary school enrolment was 2,335 of whom 23.6 percent were full-time.

According to Lugg, the distance education centre offers tuition for a minimum of two school terms to children of over five years of age in the following categories:

- primary-aged children who live far away from the nearest state primary school;
- children with a physical or emotional disability; and
- children who are recommended due to school discipline procedures.

The distance education centre also provides tuition for a maximum of two years to:

- children travelling in Australia, for example, on holiday tours or work/holiday tours;
- children travelling overseas and intending to return to Victoria;
- secondary school-based students who require a subject not available in their schools; and
- adults (anyone over 15 years) who do not have access to other education facilities.

Printed materials in form of booklets are the main medium of instructional delivery. Other media utilised at both primary and secondary levels, are audiotapes and videotapes. As much as possible, face-to-face contact is provided through occasional seminars and excursions for senior secondary students and annual residential camps for junior secondary students. When possible a team of teachers visits homes of full-time students. Audio-conferencing is widely used mainly because most students have access to telephone.

New distance education programme in British Columbia.

A new primary programme for distance learners in British Columbia, Canada, was developed in 1989. It is administered through the Technology and Distance Education Branch of the Ministry of Education. The Branch has a mandate to provide educational opportunities "to students who cannot attend a conventional school because of distance or illness; because they are temporarily living outside the province; or because they are travelling" (Stack and Power, 1994:114). The Branch also assists students who cannot access the courses they need, for some reasons. Following the restructuring of the Ministry of Education the mandate has been broadened to include technology and distance education.

Stack and Power (1994) noted that during the 1992-93 school year, a total of more than 2,800 elementary students and over 38,000 students enrolled from grades 8 to 12. About 1,200 students within the elementary enrolments were primary students(kindergarten to grade 3). Thematic modules are the main medium of instructional delivery. Home instructor's manuals and video and audio tapes supplement these. Correspondence teachers and parents also provide student support. The Primary programme has now moved to using a telecommunications system for course development.

Open schooling in India

Probably the largest of its kind (offering secondary education through distance learning) in the Commonwealth, the National Open School (NOS) in India was established in 1979. It is "an autonomous institution with the mission to provide relevant, continuing and development education to prioritised client groups, and as an alternative to the formal system" (Gaba, 1997:43). The NOS had a cumulative total enrolment of 354,811 students between 1992 and 1997. Its students include rural and urban people, and both employed and unemployed. The NOS has over 600 centres throughout the country located at government, state and private schools. The majority of students (65.5 percent) are male while 34.95 percent are female. Most of the students are enrolled in secondary level courses.

Printed materials are the main medium of instructional and information delivery. They are supplemented by audio and video tapes to be listened to or viewed at home.

It has been observed that print media have taken the major share in course delivery rather than electronic media in NOS. The main problem of the multi-media package is not how to use the package but how to integrate it with the NOS course structure (Gaba, 1997:47).

Gaba (1997) identified two problems with regard to the application of information technology in NOS. The first is that some of the schools have the technical infrastructure without technically skilled people. Secondly, some schools do not even have the basic infrastructure.

Open schooling in Zimbabwe

Zimbabwe has a wide range of open learning schemes. One example is the study group scheme in which groups of students (15 in rural areas and 20 in urban areas) meet for the purpose of studying courses leading to

junior secondary and "O" and "A" level certificates. Students register with one of the correspondence colleges in the country, from which they receive tuition and regular guidance and assessment by distance methods. Mentors whose appointment must be approved by the Ministry of Education supervise study groups. The Ministry of Education provides logistical, professional and financial support. The study group scheme has been in existence for about 25 years and has recorded a cumulative student enrolment of 81,114 (46,243 male and 34,871 female) between 1994 and 1997, an average enrolment of 20,000 students per year (Mafunga, 1998). The scheme has widened access to basic education especially for girls.

A second open schooling scheme in Zimbabwe is the Government Correspondence School, which was established in 1930 to cater for white children only. It is now open to everyone. It offers primary education from Grade 1 to Grade 4 and there are plans to extend provision to Grade 7 (Mafunga, 1998). The main target population are children living in isolated areas such as game parks, mines, and large farms where conventional schools are not available or are inaccessible because of long distances children would have to travel. The school has an enrolment of 284 pupils of whom 131 are girls. This is a comparatively small number but significant as the school provides education to young children who would otherwise be unable to enter school until they are ten years or more (Mafunga, 1998). Printed materials are the main medium of instruction, supplemented by daily radio broadcasts and audiotapes. A recent survey revealed that "for a number of valid reasons, only 7.5 percent of the supervisors indicated regular listening to daily radio broadcasts" (Mafunga 1998:72). Supervisors preferred the use of audio and video tapes in homes or groups. Parents, mainly mothers, supervise their children who learn individually in their homes. In some cases they form small groups supervised by one of the parents.

The above examples of open schooling and others adequately described in various publications tend to support Phillips' (1994) observation that open schooling can be a successful alternative to conventional teaching, especially in its ability to reach disadvantaged sub-groups of the population in a cost-effective manner. However, although open schooling for primary and secondary education has made significant impact in all countries and have tremendous potential, the challenges for open schools are enormous.

Challenges for open schooling

The 1990 World Conference *Education for All*, provided an impetus for countries world wide to develop strategies for increasing access to basic education. This has had direct implications for the expansion and reinforcing of open schools and for improving the quality of education they provide. Article 5 of the World Declaration on Education For All, stresses the need to broaden the means and scope of basic education and recommends the use of supplementary alternatives which can help "to meet the basic learning needs of children with limited or no access to formal schooling, provided that they share the same standards of learning applied to schools, and are adequately supported" (Fordham, 1992:72).

The World Bank (1995) noted that the average level of education in developing countries was increasing. When considered in absolute terms, achievements in enrolments were remarkable "as they occurred at a time of general fiscal restraint and, in many regions, of rapid population growth" (World Bank, 1995:33).

However, despite past success in increasing access, especially at primary level, the future holds major challenges at all stages of educational development. The absolute numbers of children not attending school at all is likely to increase to 145 million in 2000 and 162 million in 2015, unless the pace of enrolment accelerates.

At secondary level there is a growing gap between demand and supply which are attributable to population growth rate; government's difficulties in financing an expanded public system; poor parents' difficulties in paying school fees; and restrictions on private schooling. (World Bank, 1995:43).

Related to the problem of limited access to primary and secondary education is the problem of equity. Various disadvantaged groups go to school less than others because of limited access and lower demand. Such disadvantaged groups include girls; rural poor; children from linguistic and ethnic minorities; and nomads. Other groups are refugees, street and working children, and children with special needs (World Bank, 1995).

Another challenge arises from the need to retrain people for employment and at home in "a fast socio-technological scene". (Mukhopadhyay, 1994:8).

Although open schooling can contribute a great deal to meeting the huge demand for education especially at primary and secondary levels it is evident from the literature and the above case studies that the potential of open schooling has yet to be fully explored and exploited (see Phillips, 1994).

Issues In the development of open schooling

Open and distance learning institutions, especially in developing countries share similar inhibiting factors which include:

- inadequate, or at least, varying financial resources from national governments that are inclined to destabilise both planning and operational stages at critical phases of development;
- inadequate or unreliable communications systems;
- limited access for the population at large to electrical and electronic communications technologies on which
- such large-scale systems may wish to depend;
- lack of qualified teaching, media production and administrative personnel;
- instinctive resistance of many, if not most, conventional teachers and educational administrators to the unfamiliar philosophies inherent in distance education. (Smith, 1988:5).

Further, Smith (1988) identified key issues in the development of open and distance learning which need to be examined within the context of open schooling. Some of these are:

- The question of access and equity: to what extent does the system widen educational opportunity, especially to previously disadvantaged groups in the population at large.
- Questions, not about the quantity of learning that may be taking place, but about the quality of the distance teaching-leaming process and how it may be equated with that of more conventional institutions and systems which provide some bench-mark (often more imaginary than real but nonetheless one to which distance educators are expected to aspire) for purposes of comparison.
- Because of the nature of the exercise where the teacher and student are geographically separated for most of the duration of a course, the effectiveness of the use of communications technology assumes considerable importance.
- The all-important role or management, to ensure the system works in a cohesive, efficient and sensitive way for students, needs to be examined. So, too, resource factors and related matters of costs and benefits require analysis.

In trying to find solutions to the above problems, there is a need to ask ourselves a few questions:

- What strategies do we need to reinforce open schooling?
- To what extent can information and communication technology (ICT) improve the quantity and quality of open schooling? Is there no danger that the application of ICT will widen the gap between rural and urban learners and between developed and developing countries?
- How can we strike a balance between meeting the increasing demand for basic education and (re) training for industry?
- How can we improve and maintain quality in open schooling without comprising the principles of open access and flexibility? Should we insist on entry qualifications?
- Doesn't concern for compatibility of standards between conventional and open schools create problems especially in terms of curriculum development for open schools?
- How can we ensure that open schooling is cost effective while maintaining the principles of "open admission" which is sometimes associated with high failure rates, in open schools.

It can be argued that no single institution, country or government in the developing world, particularly, can deal (on its own) with the above problems, adequately. There is a need for co-operation and collaboration. In this regard The Commonwealth of Learning has initiated a collaborative programme focusing on, among other things, co-creation and exchange of course materials in open schools.

Another interesting collaborative project in which COL and UNESCO, among others are being involved is the proposed Multi-Learning Channel Base (MLCB) for East and Southern Africa. It aims, among other objectives, to increase access and improve quality, relevance and affordability of education, through the use of multi-media and distance education approaches.

Perhaps the most important question here is: Why has so little been done in the area of collaboration?

Conclusion

Open schooling programmes can significantly expand and improve educational opportunities, for disadvantaged groups especially women and girls. Such programmes "can address in a comprehensive manner the most important obstacles to women's participation in education: lack of access to schools, poverty, inflexible schedules, irrelevant curricula, and lack of female teachers" (Teas, 1992:47).

However, if open schooling has to meet the huge demand for education, it is important to determine the factors that account for lack of collaboration, lack of staff development programmes and lack of comprehensive policies on open schooling. What, and how can we develop, strategies for expanding and reinforcing open schooling?

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