

Formal, informal and non-formal learning: Key differences and implications for research

Conference abstract

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Abstract

Background

Educational research is often interested in aspects that are more readily associated with formal learning, such as assessment (e.g., Jerrim, 2022) and curriculum (e.g., Gandolfi, 2021), but this is only one part of the education landscape. Formal education (or learning) has been studied by many. Coombs and Ahmed (1974) define it as “the institutionalized, chronologically graded and hierarchically structured... system, spanning lower primary school and the upper reaches of the university” (p. 8). Formal learning often happens in formal learning institutions (such as schools), is hierarchical (based on learning objectives organised into linear progressions), and often results in certifications or qualifications (Ivanova, 2016).

Less attention is paid to informal and non-formal learning, which, although used interchangeably, have intricacies and differences. Informal learning can be thought of as a by-product of other experiences (e.g., Allaste et al., 2021) and includes knowledge that is not specifically sought, so it can be unnoticed (Eraut, 2004). Furthermore, learners may have more influence over what they choose to learn, may initiate learning and take part in it voluntarily (Garner et al., 2015). This contrasts formal learning, where learners often cannot choose the content or order of learning.

Non-formal learning has been defined as “any organized, systematic, educational activity carried on outside the framework of the formal system to provide selected types of learning to particular subgroups in the population, adults as well as children” (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). It is associated with broader range of learning activities than formal learning and tends to focus less on cognitive performance (Madjar & Cohen-Malayev, 2013) in comparison to formal learning.

Aims

In this project we set out to identify the key characteristics (definitions, benefits and disadvantages) of formal, informal and non-formal learning and highlight how the three modes of formality differ from each other or if they have any similarities. We also wanted to explore the research methods or tools that could be used to investigate these three modes of formality, and which could inform our study of formality in school settings.

Method

We conducted a semi-systematic literature review by searching for specific key words related to formal, informal and non-formal education and curriculum in six education research databases. We focused on research published in the last 20 years and ignored documents that related to social media, technology or those that focused specifically on further/higher education. We subsequently identified and reviewed 134 documents. We used MAXQDA 2022 software to review the literature and devised a coding frame of 21 low inference codes that covered definition, benefits and disadvantages of the three modes of formality. We also considered the methods used in the literature and found a lack of recognised methods that could specifically inform the study of non-formal learning. Using the identified characteristics of the modes of formality, we developed observation and interview schedules, which we subsequently tested in schools.

Outcomes

The review highlighted that formal learning is well-defined and understood, and that there is a lot of confusion between informal and non-formal learning. We identified overlaps between the three modes of formality and found that non-formal learning appears to be a blend of the characteristics of formal and informal learning.

Furthermore, each mode of formality has implications for research. Formal learning may be easier to observe as it can be identified by Direct Teaching Behaviours (e.g., explaining, demonstrating, making corrections) whilst informal learning can happen anywhere, can be communicated via Indirect Teaching Behaviours (e.g., sense of humour, body language) and may not be easily observed (Jung & Choi, 2016). As non-formal learning contains characteristics of both formal and informal learning, this adds to the complexity of studying non-formality, and can pose difficulties for research that wants to identify non-formality in practice.

In this presentation, we outlined the characteristics of formal, informal and non-formal learning. Specific focus was given to non-formal and informal learning as they are often thought of as interchangeable, although they are different. We explained why non-formality appears to be a blend of formal and informal learning. Lastly, we discussed the development of observation and interview schedules, and how we used these methods to study the three modes of formality in schools.

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