



Learning as development: rethinking international education in a changing world

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Review

Learning as development: rethinking international education in a changing world. By Daniel A Wagner. Pp 324. London and New York: Routledge. 2018. £34.99 (pbk). ISBN 9781848726079.

This ambitious book seeks to conceptualise ‘learning as development’ as a foundational approach to international development. It does so by synthesising interdisciplinary perspectives on learning with research evidence from multiple social sciences. Its publication is timely: despite the inclusion of education in the Millennium Development Goals and pivotal role of education across the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), education for international development continues to be resourced less than health and infrastructure (UNESCO, 2015). Indeed, recent estimates indicate a \$1.8 trillion funding shortfall across middle- and low-income countries to meet the requirements of SDG4 on inclusive and equitable quality education by 2030 (DfID, 2017).

Part 1 provides the overarching conceptual frame for the book, examining the synergies between the discourses of international development and human development. Chapter 1 briefly surveys the contribution of economic, sociological, psychological, political and anthropological perspectives on international development. It concludes that new interdisciplinary approaches are required to support human development. Chapter 2 provides what is inevitably, due to the constraints of space and scope of this book, a cursory introduction to key theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky, Brofenbrenner and Sen to elucidate the ‘life-span human development approach’ advocated here. It claims this more expansive approach is necessary to meet the SDGs. Consequently, it is argued in Chapter 3 that the promotion of learning is the ‘principal challenge’ to achieving these goals. Wagner uses his own ‘learning framework’ (2014) that designates quadrants that describe the relationship between learning contexts and learning practices to examine the role of context in both formal and non-formal settings. Importantly, this chapter addresses the challenges of the increasing cultural and linguistic heterogeneity in many developing countries and briefly touches upon the impact of migration and conflict.

Part 2 goes on to examine learning in three broad stages: early childhood, school-aged children and adult learning. Rather than providing an integrated theory of lifelong learning, this develops what could be described as a ‘life-span orientation’ towards learning. These three chapters interrogate the evidence base across the age phases to make well-informed and perceptive suggestions on new directions for improved policy and practice for learning within resource-poor and marginalised communities. Although the importance of informal education to these contexts emerges as a key theme in the first half of the book, Part 3 focuses more specifically on the role of schools and teachers in supporting learning. Interestingly, this book concludes with an agenda for learning equity proclaiming ‘learning promotes sustainable development’ (p. 260) without having engaged explicitly

with the critique that further schooling may in fact hinder the development of sustainable societies.

The final part of the book focuses on contemporary trends and challenges in learning and development. Chapter 9 interrogates the uses of innovative digital approaches to support learning both inside and outside of the classroom. This reports upon Wagner's use of technology to support early literacy for South African school children that saw the International Literary Institute, of which he is founding Director, awarded the 2014 UNESCO Confucius International Literary Prize. Chapter 10 on 'Globalisation and the Environment' is, disappointingly, the shortest in this section. Rejecting an economic growth agenda for international development, it simply concludes that 'a global citizenry that is continuously learning is essential' (p. 213). This fails to adequately address 'The Environmental Imperative' referred to by Wagner, or recognise the importance of Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (Bamber *et al.*, 2018) that arguably constitutes 'the very heart of the sustainability agenda in education' (King, 2017, p. 808).

In Chapter 11 on the measurement of learning, Wagner explores methodological and empirical considerations when navigating the 'data-driven reality' (p. 218) of the international development sector. Reflecting his scientific orientation, Wagner's account is underpinned by a belief that 'learning can only be adequately understood if there are commonly accepted methods for measuring it' (p. 218). Following an overview of effective research designs and approaches to sampling, Wagner briefly introduces the reader to related concepts such as credibility, validity, reliability and comparability. He sets out to contest both that scientific findings about learning are generalisable and that context specificity necessarily negates the applicability of findings to other settings. The tensions underpinning this duality are exposed across the three principles he proposes for gathering evidence of learning: 'If you cannot measure it, you cannot manage it', 'If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail' and 'Looking only where there's light'.

Those unsettled by Wagner's advocacy for measurability and accountability in formal education internationally will be reassured that he remains well attuned to the challenges of embedding learning measurement tools sensitive to localised conditions, language and attitudes. This is evident in his call for 'Smaller, Quicker, Cheaper Assessments' and 'Citizen-Led Assessments' within social science research. Wagner also emphasises that global learning metrics present a barrier to addressing inequalities between and within nations. Indeed, international surveys are often completed by a subset of the international community, serving to marginalise nations, including those with remote communities such as small island states, silencing their contribution to policy and practice. The final chapter of this book instead suggests a learning equity agenda that focuses on 'closing the gap' and 'raising the floor', illustrating Wagner's assertion that 'effective measurement is essential' (p. 260). This approach remains vulnerable to the accusation that attempts to make explicit educational phenomena and processes can easily become over-determined by metrics that become perverse ends in themselves. Using learning as a proxy for education, as in this book, risks evading important questions about content, purpose and relationships (Biesta, 2015), evoking Arendt's call for educators not to predict the needs of the future and inhibit what cannot be foreseen and instead prepare their students 'in advance for the task of renewing a common world' (1977, p. 177).

Overall, this is an accessible and highly informative text for those studying education and international development. The extensive use of detailed footnotes provides a wealth of evidence from research, policy and practice that will provide useful starting points for those undertaking their own investigations in this field. This authoritative account, including a foreword by the Director General of UNESCO, reflects Wagner's significant research expertise and extensive practical experience in the arena of international development. Notably, each chapter begins with a short account of the lived experience of learning as development to contextualise the topic under discussion. These vignettes draw upon Wagner's work in resource-poor communities over the last five decades, from his time as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Morocco during 1968–1970, working as a civil engineer in rural areas of the Middle Atlas Mountains. This device is effectively deployed to illustrate the localised nature of learning in low-income developing countries. Revisiting these narratives within the conclusion for each chapter also serves to problematise rather than over-simplify important debates.

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