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LEARNING AS DEVELOPMENT

Rethinking International Education in a Changing World

DANIEL A. WAGNER

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Today, nearly one in five children, adolescents, and youth are without educational opportunities, with 263 million young people worldwide out of school (Global Partnership for Education, 2018). The most vulnerable children, particularly those living in fragile and conflict-affected countries, remain the most likely to experience interrupted education (Bird, 2009). And even for children who do access schooling, learning remains a major challenge. In this global context, initiatives like the Global Partnership for Education and Millions Learning seek to address gaps in education access and quality, often with success, even as international resources for education development work comprise just 2 percent of global humanitarian aid (Robinson, Winthrop, & McGivney, 2016; Tapp, 2016).

With the challenges and opportunities of education development work as its background, Daniel A. Wagner's new book *Learning as Development: Rethinking International Education in a Changing World* offers a comprehensive review of major issues related to education in developing countries, with a particular focus on lifelong learning among the most marginalized people. Wagner draws on his deep experience in international education research, policy, and practice, proposing a new approach to international development work that centers not on economic growth but on human development, measured through learning. Wagner is the UNESCO Chair in Learning and Literacy, the director of the International Education Development program, and professor of education at the University of Pennsylvania, and he brings to the book insights from his work in these various roles. The book is written in clear and accessible prose and will be especially valuable for students and researchers exploring historical and contemporary relationships among international development, human development, and learning in low-income countries around the world.

Wagner analyzes a range of topics relevant to the field of international education, including the possibilities and limitations of technology in classrooms, the role of language of instruction in learning, and the challenges and affordances that teachers face in their work. Bringing these topics together, Wagner differentiates between *formal education*, which children, youth, and adults can experience in schools, and *learning*, which individuals engage in in both formal and "non-formal" settings across a life span.

Wagner begins by looking to the past, reminding readers that international development's origins lie in colonialism and resource extraction and considering "what international development would look like if economics were not the primary yardstick for measuring national success" (p. 2). He argues that human development, rather than economic development and economic growth, should be the central goal and measure of international development work, with lifelong learning the engine of this development. To guide international development that focuses not on consumption—which drives climate change and inequality—but instead on locally relevant skills and knowledge, Wagner proposes a "learning equity agenda." This agenda integrates five key ideas about learning: (1) learning takes place across the life span, in both

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formal and nonformal settings; (2) learning is local, as “local schools and teachers are critical components of social and institutional attempts to support human learning” (p. 260); (3) technology can support learning if carefully implemented and studied; (4) learning requires effective measurement tools to identify and track both short- and long-term learning gains (one such tool Wagner proposes is the “Learning Gini Index,” which measures learning inequality *within* rather than between countries, identifying educational inequality between groups living in the same country and thereby providing granular information that can guide education reform); and (5) lifelong learning is central in sustainable development, as it helps communities prepare for and respond to “mega-trends” like globalization, climate change, and migration. It also helps stabilize communities facing change and disruption, arming them with vital information and skills that help communities “engage in the world meaningfully and productively” (p. 261) even in the face of upheaval.

The book is divided into four sections. Part 1, “Development,” includes three chapters: “International Development,” “Human Development,” and “Learning as Development.” Wagner differentiates between international development, which has historically focused on economic production and growth, and human development, which is connected to how “humans grow, adapt, create, and seek well-being and happiness” (p. 2). While the two may be interconnected, Wagner highlights the central role of *learning* in human development, not traditionally measured in international development. In conceptualizing “Learning as Development,” Wagner proposes a new approach to development work that merges human and international development, centering learning. The section concludes with Wagner’s “learning framework” (p. 58), four quadrants that outline the various structures and contexts in which learning takes place across the life span. According to the learning framework, “more structured” learning practices, such as reading and writing, occur in “formal” settings, such as school, whereas “less structured” learning practices, such as learning about a vendor’s products, occur in “non-formal settings,” such as the marketplace or home (p. 58). Together, these practices and contexts structure individuals’ lifelong learning.

Part 2, “Learning,” builds on Wagner’s learning framework to consider the discrete time periods when learning occurs and the ways that these periods differ. The three chapters in this section explore “Learning in Early Childhood,” “Children and Basic Skills,” and “Youth and Adult Learning.” Each section begins with a vignette that highlights major challenges and possibilities for learning across the life span. Aissatou, for example, is eight years old and attending school in Guinea. Her teacher instructs in French, a language she does not understand. She has only emergent literacy skills and thus struggles to learn and wonders whether she will be able to continue her schooling past primary. Aissatou’s struggle exemplifies key challenges to learning that students around the world face.

Part 3, “Educational Institutions,” focuses on “Schools and Schooling” and “Teachers and Pedagogies” and explores the roles schools and teachers have played in formal education across history and geography. Wagner discusses the different types of schools that exist globally, including religious and private schools, as well as the role of material inputs in supporting effective schooling. Wagner also highlights the central role of teachers in schools. He enumerates the many challenges in ensuring that teachers in developing settings are able to teach effectively, including gaps in teacher training, insufficient classroom resources, and inappropriate or ineffectively implemented curricula.

The final section, “Trends and Challenges,” focuses on emerging global phenomena that have implications for education in developing countries. The first chapter in this section, “New Technologies,” explores digital technology’s strengths and limitations in supporting learning in and outside of classrooms and proposes an ICT4E framework to conceptualize how technology is used for education in developing countries. This framework includes four elements—purposes, devices, end users, and contexts—that together make up a technological approach to educational challenges. The chapter “Globalization and the Environment” tackles important questions related to changing climate, migration, and armed conflict and the implications of these phenomena for education and learning. In particular, Wagner highlights the detrimental

effects of climate change on learning, noting that schooling is negatively impacted by climate crises and that those with access to formal education and information are best equipped to respond to climate change both during crises and in longer-term decision making and planning. Those without educational and information access, however, are often the most vulnerable to climate change. Migration, a related global “mega-trend,” also has massive implications for learning, as migrating children enter schools with unfamiliar languages of instruction, metrics for achievement, and curricula. Children seeking education in settings of armed conflict face considerable hurdles particular to displacement, including threats to physical and psychological safety that undermine learning. In the final chapter, “Learning Equity,” Wagner considers strategies for measuring and addressing gaps in learning for different groups and proposes a “learning equity agenda” (p. 259) to guide international development work in education.

Wagner places numerous topics related to international education and development in conversation with topics in human development, outlining a new guiding framework for international development. In addition to this new framing, the book also offers two additional practical resources. First, each chapter begins with a vignette that frames the main ideas and themes in the chapter and that could be used to prompt conversation during a class session. These vignettes are drawn from Wagner’s and others’ research, and they raise key questions about the purposes of education, inequality in education, and levers for reform. For example, chapter 6, “Youth and Adult Learning,” begins with a conversation between Azra, a mother from a village in Turkey, and Zeynep, a doctoral student. Azra shares that while she knows many things that are important for caring for her daughter, including how to tell if she is sick, she cannot know if her daughter is learning at school because she herself never learned to read. Azra knows that there is a women’s literacy program in a nearby village and hopes one day to be able to attend so that “both my daughter and I will be able to read together” (p. 123). This vignette sets the stage for a chapter about structured and unstructured learning for adults that takes place in formal and non-formal settings and the immense knowledge that Azra brings to her parenting even in the absence of formal schooling.

A second key resource of the book is the collection of notes and references that follows each chapter. These curated lists offer students and scholars citations on discrete topics, including gender and education, education in early childhood, and teacher training in developing countries, and provide jumping-off points for continued exploration. Given its broad and ambitious scope, the book does not cover in detail every topic it addresses. Instead, Wagner sketches broad themes in many domains, reviewing major scholars, frameworks, theories, and empirical findings and providing concluding lists that support readers’ ongoing learning.

This book is a useful resource for students and scholars of international education and development. At a time defined by rising temperatures and growing inequality, Wagner rethinks international development, centering it not around economic growth but, rather, human development driven by learning. His is a timely message and one with important implications for education development that supports life-long learning for individuals and communities around the world.

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