



**Rincón-Gallardo, S. (2019). *Liberating learning. Education change as social movement*. Routledge.**

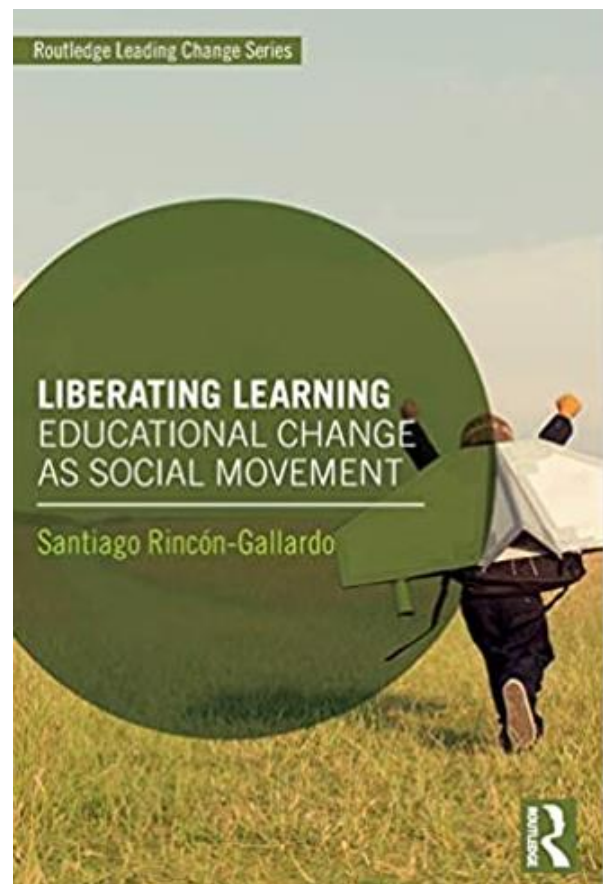
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Through an articulated critique, cross-cultural empirical evidence, and a suggestive proposal, Santiago Rincón-Gallardo has addressed clearly three key questions in his book, *Liberating Learning*. These questions are as follows: What is wrong with formal schooling? Why is learning blocked? How could education make the difference for the underdog?

The book is structured in seven chapters. Rincón-Gallardo begins by presenting a clear-headed understanding of the problem and claims for a different educational approach. “Mass compulsory schooling was an invention that responded to the needs of the industrial revolution”. Parents, he continues to say, needed a place to send our kids while we work. Custody, then, was a tacit purpose of the formal schooling besides discipline (control), and talent screening. This model of schooling was “an effective way to manage large numbers of students”, but he also admits that it has failed in promoting meaningful learning. That is, the “ability to learn on their own, to find joy in their power to learn, and to make the world a better place” (pp. 1-3).



This idea of learning implies a pedagogical base to know how to learn by our selves, a new attitude – being joyful instead of suffering by social pressure or academic stress – and a political orientation to transform reality. As it can rightly presume, Rincón-Gallardo's ideas have a close resemblance to those of Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich. An historical account and a sound pedagogical underpin his preferred idea of educational change, which contrast with the mainstream literature that recommends pouring more money to educational systems or provide miraculous inputs for raising schools' standards.

Why is Rincón-Gallardo's proposal relevant in times where some developing countries have achieved a universal enrollment at basic levels of education? First of all, because accepting large numbers of children in schools – momentous as it is – says little about their real capacity of learning. Mexico, for instance, where Santiago was raised and considered as a “successful student” for fulfilling his teachers' expectations – has failed in terms of improving and distributing fairly the quality of education. Despite of registering high enrollment rates and incorporating more students from the most disadvantaged groups of society, mean performance remain “stable in reading, mathematics and science throughout most of Mexico's participation in PISA” (2003 to date; OECD, 2019, p. 1). For this reason - and others beyond international standards -, learning must be also a normative threshold of educational policies.

This normative claim is supported by facts and practical examples in Rincón-Gallardo's book. Drawing experiences from Mexico, Egypt, India, USA and Canada, it shows that *real change* is possible whether educational strategies are focused on “child-centered pedagogies”, local contexts are taken into account, and power relations are modified by a renewed pedagogy, as well as “deliberated efforts” of the administrative officials. In chapter 2, Rincón-Gallardo explains how

Mexican students could discern critically about their academic problems, how a group of Canadian students learned by doing in a course of Research and Development (R&D), and how pupils in Colombia were able to make decisions in their schools and learn “at their own pace”. Individuality is at the center of the idea of educational change in this book.

Recognizing students as individuals is very important to understand the awareness of a student, her or his reasoned ideas and choices about learning, and her or his human agency to act responsibly in their respective contexts. Individuality – universal as it is - is not, logically, detached from collective life or particular and local contexts where students thrive. This “deep complementary” between individuals' agency and social arrangements (Sen, 1999, pp, xi-xii) helps explain, from my particular point of view, why educational strategies for liberating learning has been effective over world.

In chapter 3, Rincón-Gallardo makes other contribution by re-thinking the role of social movements. He suggests not to idealize such structures that allow and constrain human action, but “to identify in their logic of operation a useful metaphor to redefine how we think about educational change” (p. 41). What Rincón-Gallardo suggests is twofold. First, that the real power to change education may not come only from top bureaucrats, but also from the “people's determination”, once they get involve in meaningful learning processes. Learning is “practice of freedom”, as Freire's recalled. And secondly, that educational change as social movement must be based on a “cultural renewal”, not merely in legal frameworks or political willingness.

In order to achieve this, pedagogical, social and political strategies need to be constructed. In fact, chapters 4, 5 and, 6 discuss, respectively, the importance of making education relevance for students, since “powerful learning occurs when students and

adults explore questions that matter to them” (p. 65). The “social arena”, on the other hand, refers to the “world of changing values” and social behaviors, according to Rincón-Gallardo. In contrast with some input-focused or material-based proposals, Chapter 5 shows an interesting discussion on “public narratives” to “mobilize the emotions that enable human agency” in the pursuit of learning (p. 80). In this regard, the role of teacher also needs to be rethought, as well as the power structures where they operate. Chapter 6 discusses the political arena, as a realm where pressure need to be created to unleash learning from vertical and highly hierarchical logic. Control must be replaced by transparency and trust whether “deep learning” is the ultimate goal of public policies.

Chapter 6 has a particular relevance for policy analysis. Here, it is discussed how practical cases of successful learning can be linked with policy-making processes. Is it possible to bridge the knowledge and experiences coming from the ground to the political rationality of elected governments? According to Rincón-Gallardo, this is possible through a new-governance. This would mean a more horizontal ways of interacting between students, educators, administrators and “allies” that are motivated, basically, by the transformative capacity of deep learning. The author, in fact, emphasizes “ideas to encourage a proactive stance towards transformative work, rather than an openly oppositional stance” (p. 99).

Although this idea is neither a conservative nor impracticable, it does deserve further discussions given: (1) the failed attempts to transform learning and, (2) the real power asymmetries between political and social

actors. Teachers’ trade unions, for instance, can organize rallies in an effective way and put forward their demands clearly whereas illiterate people cannot. How have radical and dissident groups of teachers been marginalized from the national strategies to transform “horizontally” and in a “cooperative” way education meanwhile business-oriented actors succeed in setting a national agenda? Why was the Program for Improvement of Educational Achievement (PIEA) cancelled in Mexico in 2013 when it had proved to be effective? Why were the opponents of the PIEA more powerful to get ride of it than its “allies”? Under what bases is collaboration grounded?

Santiago Rincón-Gallardo was right when he notes that “learning” and “power” were two “blindspots” in the existing literature on educational change and his book has shed light on both. However, a more elaborated idea of the power - principally but not exclusively – of bureaucracies is necessary to situate it more realistically in the noteworthy idea of considering educational change as a “social movement”. This is not to say that top or macro politics determines everything in the education systems, but to emphasize, following Abhijit V Banerjee and Esther Duflo’s ideas, that “political constraints are real”, but without ignoring that there is considerable “slack” to improve policies at the margin (2011, p. 264).

Rincón-Gallardo closes his thoughtful proposal by inviting us to fight against pessimism and embark upon an educational change movement. As a good learner, he is powerfully persuasive, but as a committed scholar and practitioner he has also the capacity to think clearly: what really matters in education is “the full realization of our humanity”.

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