

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



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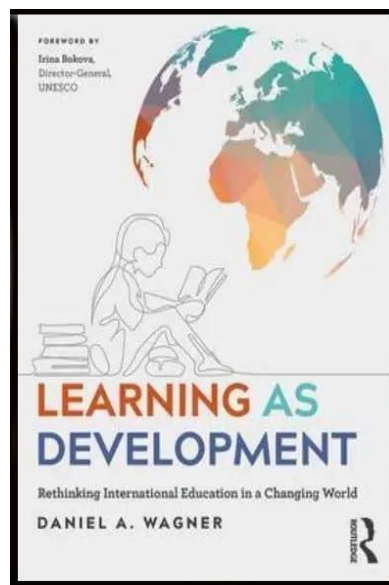
Wagner, D. A. (2026). *Learning as development: Rethinking international education in a changing world* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

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Daniel Wagner's *Learning as Development* offers a careful and persuasive rethinking of the relationship between learning, human development and international education. In this second edition, Wagner invites readers to look beyond familiar measures of development, such as economic growth, national income, school enrolment and institutional expansion. His central concern is more human: whether people, especially those living in poor and marginalised communities, have meaningful opportunities to learn throughout their lives.



Wagner is well placed to make this argument. He is the UNESCO Chair in Learning and Literacy and Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. His long experience with international organisations, governments and civil society groups is visible throughout the book. The discussion is scholarly but is never detached from the everyday realities of learners, families, teachers and communities. The book carries the authority of a researcher, while also showing the patience of someone who has spent many years listening to how people learn in different cultural settings.

The book is organised into four broad parts. The first introduces international development, human development and Wagner's central idea of "learning as development". The second follows learning across the life course, from early childhood to basic skills, youth learning and adult education. The third examines schools, schooling, teachers and pedagogy. The final part turns to major contemporary challenges, including technology, artificial intelligence, globalisation, migration, climate change, learning

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measurement and learning equity. This structure helps the reader see learning not as a narrow school-based activity, but as a lifelong social process.

One of the book's main strengths is its clear distinction between education and learning. Wagner does not dismiss schools or formal education. Rather, he reminds readers that schooling is only one setting in which learning occurs. This distinction matters because many education reforms still assume that access to school automatically leads to learning. In many contexts, however, children may be enrolled in school while learning very little. Adults may join literacy programmes without gaining usable skills. New technologies may be introduced into classrooms without changing the quality of instruction. Wagner's argument is therefore a useful warning against confusing participation with genuine learning.

The book's deeper argument is captured in Wagner's statement that "Learning is the fundamental thread of human development" (p. xvi). This sentence gives the book its moral and analytical centre. Learning is not treated simply as a sectoral concern within education policy. It is presented as a condition for human agency, resilience, participation and social change. In this respect, Wagner's argument speaks directly to Sen's (1999) idea of development as the expansion of human freedoms and to Nussbaum's (2011) capability approach. Like those works, this book rejects a narrow economic view of development. Its distinctive contribution is to place learning at the centre of that broader human development conversation.

Another strength is the book's attention to context. Wagner repeatedly shows that learning is shaped by language, culture, family life, poverty, gender, disability, migration, technology and local institutions. The book resists the idea that educational solutions can simply be transferred from one country to another without careful adaptation. This is especially important in international development, where policies are often designed at a global level but implemented in very different local realities.

The use of stories at the beginning of chapters is one of the most engaging features of the book. These stories bring the discussion closer to real life. Instead of presenting development only through statistics, indicators and policy language, Wagner introduces readers to learners in different parts of the world. Through these accounts, the reader sees how learning is connected to hope, exclusion, opportunity and survival. The stories make the book more accessible without weakening its academic value.

The second edition is also valuable because it responds to major changes that have taken place since the first edition. Wagner discusses the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, migration, geopolitical tension and the rise of artificial intelligence. His treatment of technology is balanced. He recognises that digital tools can support learning, but he is careful not to treat technology as a magic solution. For Wagner, technology only becomes meaningful when it is connected to good pedagogy, teacher support, equity and local needs.

The chapters on early childhood and foundational learning are especially relevant. Wagner places early learning within a broader view of human development. Early childhood is not treated simply as preparation for school, but as a crucial period for health, language, social development, family support and long-term well-being. This discussion will be useful for readers working in early childhood education, child rights, social policy and educational planning.

The book also contributes to current debates on Sustainable Development Goal 4, learning poverty, foundational literacy and numeracy, and educational equity, especially in relation to UNESCO's (2021) call to rethink the future of education and the World Bank's (2018) concern with learning outcomes. Wagner's emphasis, however, is broader than performance measurement alone. He is interested not only in whether students score higher, but also in whether learning expands human possibility across the lifespan.

The discussion of learning equity is one of the book's strongest contributions. Wagner does not ask only whether average learning outcomes are improving. He asks who is still being left behind. This shift is essential. A country may improve national averages while the poorest children, children with disabilities, linguistic minorities, girls, migrants or rural communities continue to face serious barriers. Wagner's concern with equity gives the book a strong moral and policy focus. His sentence, "Learning is the glue that holds families and societies together" (p. 3), is especially memorable because it reminds readers that learning is not merely an individual achievement; it is also a social bond.

The book's wide scope, however, also creates some limitations. It is strongest as a conceptual synthesis, not as an operational guide. Wagner gives readers a convincing framework for why learning matters, but he gives less attention to the practical trade-offs faced by ministries, districts, schools and civil society organisations when budgets are limited, teacher shortages are severe, data systems are weak and political priorities change. This is not a serious flaw, because a detailed policy manual would have made the book too heavy. Still, readers seeking step-by-step implementation guidance will need to read this book alongside more specialised country studies and programme evaluations.

A second limitation is that the book could have engaged more deeply with the politics of reform. Wagner discusses inequality, colonial legacies and institutional weakness, but some readers may want a sharper analysis of power: who benefits from unequal learning systems, why reforms fail, and how elite interests, financing and governance shape educational outcomes. This does not reduce the value of the book, but it points to an important area for further discussion.

Overall, *Learning as Development* is an important book for scholars, graduate students, policymakers, educators and development practitioners. It is especially useful for those who work in international education, early

childhood development, comparative education, literacy and education policy. The book does not offer simple answers, but it helps readers ask better questions. Its main message is clear: real development must be judged not only by economic growth or institutional expansion, but by whether people, especially the most marginalised, gain fair and meaningful opportunities to learn.

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About the Reviewer

Hamid Patilima is an Associate Professor in the Graduate Programme in Early Childhood Education at Universitas Panca Sakti Bekasi, Indonesia. Dr Hamid earned his PhD in Early Childhood Education from Universitas Negeri Jakarta, a master's in Urban Science from Universitas Indonesia, and a bachelor's in Criminology from Universitas Indonesia. His work focuses on early childhood education, children's rights, child protection, education policy, and legal and policy analysis. For more than two decades, he has combined research, teaching, policy development, and fieldwork to strengthen learning, protection, and governance systems for children and families across Indonesia. Dr Patilima has contributed to national policy development and has worked with international organisations including UNICEF, the ILO, and ICMC. His field experience spans all 38 Indonesian provinces and 224 regencies and cities. As an author, trainer, auditor, and public speaker, he promotes inclusive, rights-based, and evidence-informed approaches to education, learning, and children's wellbeing. His publications include *Rethinking Qualitative Research in Early Childhood Education: Methods, Ethics, and Emerging Trends* (2025), *Vision for Child-Friendly Cities*, and *The Role of Educators in Building Resilience in Early Childhood*.



About the Author

Daniel A. Wagner is a Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the UNESCO Chair in Learning and Literacy, Founding Director of the International Literacy Institute, Founding Director of the federally funded National Center on Adult Literacy, and Founding Director of Penn GSE's International Educational Development master's program. Dr. Wagner received his Ph.D. in Psychology at the University of Michigan in 1976, was a two-year postdoctoral fellow at Harvard University, a Visiting Fellow at the International Institute of Education Planning in Paris, a Visiting Professor at the University of Geneva (Switzerland), and a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Paris. Dr. Wagner has extensive experience in national and international educational issues, and has been an international development advisor to UNESCO, UNICEF, World Bank, USAID, DFID, and others. He is a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, the American Anthropological Association, and the American Educational Research Association. In 2021, he was elected Honorary Fellow of the Comparative and International Education Society.



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