

Review of Learning a Living. Radical Innovation in Education for Work by V. Hannon, S. Gillinson, & L. Shanks.

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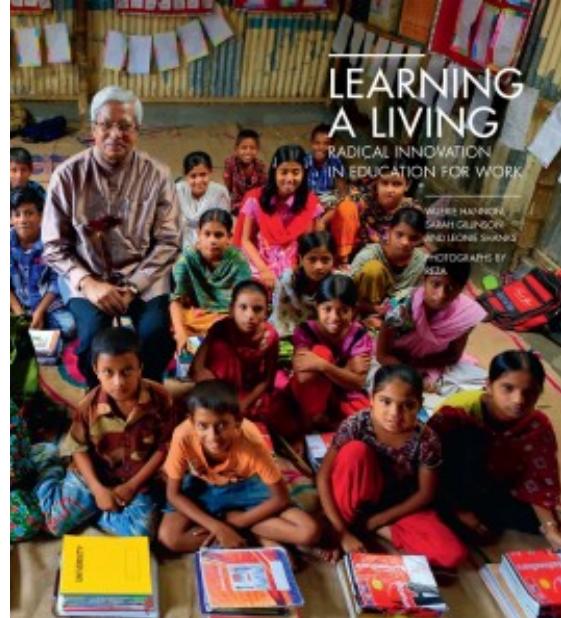
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This publication aims at highlighting innovative relationships between education and work in today's world. It portrays different stories around the globe that have succeeded in providing education while at the same time supporting human beings to acquire basic skills to support themselves, their families and their communities. The overall theme across the chapters is learning how to enter the labor force, as its title conveys: *Learning a Living*. It is a visually compelling piece since several different aspects are presented in photos. The book is organized in eight chapters and three appendices, where the reader may find the case studies, other projects mentioned and other projects not mentioned but still of interest.

This publication is part of the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE), established in 2009 by the Qatar Foundation. The purpose of the book is to make visible innovative methods that may build a connection between life-long learning and earning a living. Since this publication is meant to be inspiring, photography



plays a crucial role in communicating different stories from diverse parts of the world.

The are 15 case studies portrayed and on which the concepts of this book are built upon, spreading from Burkina Faso to Bangladesh, India to Morocco, USA to Finland, Jordan to Nicaragua, Kuwait to Brazil, California to Japan, and Nigeria, China to Ghana.

The cases studied were selected because they met five initial criteria:

- Effectively prepare people to participate in different kinds of economies.
- They do so in innovative ways.
- They are future-oriented.
- They are attentive to the employment context in which they are located, and
- They have a potential to being emulated elsewhere or else be strong enough, as a model, to allow reflection on why and how they are achieving what they are achieving.

Since initially as many as 50 examples met these criteria, the final selection was made taking diversity into account such as geographical location, target age ranges (from four to 95 years old), styles, and providers. In this manner the book presents a myriad of different contexts, situations and responses to the challenge of educating for work.

In its genre, this publication is more a report than an analytic piece of research. Its value resides in that it covers a wide part of the world, and that the writing is supported by the excellent photography by Reza (<http://www.rezaphotography.org/>)

His capacity to bring forward the detail that images convey is remarkable, and it is certainly an asset of this book.

The issues addressed in this publication are important to a wide variety of audiences: educators, families, students, teachers, community organizers, politicians and public servants, amongst others. However, it is perhaps the need to cover such wide audiences and geographies what makes this publication short of a critical reflection about the underlying causes for many of the issues presented in each chapter. For example, topics such as the changing conditions of work scenarios, technology, demography, the environment and the economy, are mentioned, yet their inter-connection and the

consequences of certain decisions over others are not discussed.

Nor is discussed the power relationships worldwide that may seem related to these *rapidly changing* conditions. Thus the first chapter (“Waking up to a new world”) concludes that “taken as a whole these factors paint a striking picture of a radically changing global economy, work and workforce. The nature of the change will depend on how we respond as individuals, organizations and as societies. The current period of flux represents a tremendous opportunity to shape a more dynamic, more sustainable and equitable world. However, without conscious effort it could just as easily lead to the opposite” (p. 22). What is not clear to the reader, precisely, is what is meant by *conscious effort* and who is to make that *effort*. Or whether it is not about *making an effort* but about debating what counts as public funding for education or who is responsible (and how) of guaranteeing everybody’s educational rights.

For these reasons, as an educational researcher/reader, one may find this book curious, in the sense that brings forward a lot of detailed, well organized, well systematized information while, at the same time, falls short at discussing issues that need to be put on the educational agenda, world wide. One such issue is the relationship between public policy and private funding in education. Additionally, what the book makes visible is that for profit organizations are being very aware of the value of education and are making a big effort to fund it. It is true that the book portrays also some examples of public education (e.g. in Finland) that seem to be advancing in interesting, innovative directions, but here and there, in the different chapters, it is conveyed that the public system is failing. This is a strong message all throughout the book’s chapters.

Even if non-for-profit initiatives are also presented and discussed, many of them seem to be (by way of education) stepping into different countries’ local policies. Additionally they seem to mobilize a huge amount of resources, both human and in important pockets of funding. These data make me think that, therefore, if any meaningful and serious public policy educational reform is to take place, it is urgent to discuss what it means in terms of budget allocation. I think that another important aspect of this book, then, is to convey that

educational funding, if it is meant to be public, should certainly increase.

The examples portrayed also show very clearly the internationalization of resources. Many of the initiatives described receive support from different parts of the world and different partners, and receive diverse types of support. While of course this is a very interesting point, the book does not put forward any questions about the power that these inter-national initiatives do build and how these initiatives may be a very important influence in any local policy at place.

The different chapters do convey very detailed information about the tools put into practice in order to educate for life, in diverse settings, for very diverse populations, and in different geographies. In this respect it is admirable the amount of data each chapter brings for any interested reader in finding out more about each particular experience.

The book also presents a framework for understanding what counts as a good *learning a living* strategy. It is described throughout the chapter as generating creative solutions to today's changing conditions. Following this line, and presenting specifically what elements constitute these creative solutions, Chapter 2 is called "The Three Elements," which are summarized as: matching students' skills with local, national and global demand; generating solutions, and creating new possibilities. In the next three chapters each of them is addressed.

Chapter 3 is about "The Fundamentals," that is, matching students' skills with local, national and global demand. In this chapter very different examples are portrayed from Finland, India, Jordan and Nigeria. The examples show a variety of strategies where the match between skills and job demand is being met. The examples also bring up issues that are not discussed but that as a reader you may find important to reflect upon, such as the relationship between public education systems and the work force. For example, in Finland, it seems to be the case that the solution was found within the public educational system, through innovation in the vocational and education training system. Yet in India the example is about a corporate university, described as a luxurious environment where "trainees focus entirely on learning." This example is about a big corporation training their own employees, and as stated on page 48, "for Infosys the investment in learning is huge

and so is the return. All trainees are paid a salary during their time at the Global Education Center (the name of the University) but no one is obliged to stay, either during or after the training period. Less than 1 percent of trainees leave. On average trainees choose to stay for 3 to 5 years, far longer than necessary for Infosys to recoup its investment.” As a reader, when comparing Finland’s and India’s portrayed examples, a question comes up about the educational policy issues underlying these different experiences. Who is shaping educational policy, and how? Is education to become, finally, an issue of the private sector? The other two examples portrayed in the chapter (from Jordan and Nigeria) present experiences in which an NGO and a rural entrepreneur (this last one on his own) start an educational experience, also bring up issues about who is funding these educational experiences, where and how. In the examples of India and Nigeria, additionally, the book is explicitly critic about the public educational system. Presented as a description of facts (for example: “In Jordan the criticisms of the public education system are similar to other places in the world” (p. 51), no questions are posed about who makes what decisions so that the public education system seems to be in such poor condition. Thus the book leaves these issues unexamined while builds a case towards the inevitable: privatizing education seems to be the accurate path.

Chapter 4 is about “The Bigger Picture”—that is, generating solutions, and Chapter 5, “The Next Frontier,” spells out the creation of new possibilities. These chapters repeat the format in which the argument is presented, namely a very brief introduction about the issues, a very well written and very well supported with evidence case, and some brief conclusions. Indeed the arguments are compelling and therefore, as I said previously, it is a book meant to report, portray and make different experiences, from very distinct places, known.

It seems as if in each of the countries where the experiences are carried out, schooling is not addressing these elements, and thus they are not preparing students in the ways in which the projects selected seem to be doing. As a reader one is left with the question of whether these elements shouldn’t be put forward as a serious discussion over public policy (educational and labor policy as well).

About the Reviewer

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Ana Inés Heras is a National Researcher for the Argentinean Research Council with institutional affiliations at IRICE-CONICET (National Research Council) and the Instituto para la Inclusión Social y el Desarrollo Humano. She earned her M.A. and Ph.D. in Education in the area of Language, Culture and Literacy (1995) with a Fulbright Scholarship at UCSB, specializing in ethnography and sociolinguistics. She also studied History and Physical Education at the undergraduate level in Argentina. She currently studies participants' collective learning processes at autonomous, self-managed organizations in contemporary Argentina, focusing on how diversity is understood in such processes. Her research approach combines an anthropological perspective with that of other social sciences, in particular psychoanalysis, social psychology, history and emancipatory education.



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