

Clumping or Splitting? Reflecting on international education and development

Review of S. McGrath and Qing Gu (2016) *Routledge Handbook of International Education and Development* Abingdon: Routledge (ISBN 978-0-415-74754-7)

How does one make sense of the sprawling area of investigation that comprises international education and development? Unlike comparative education, which has a number of foundational thinkers, some clear areas of dispute around theory, method and location, international education and development has grown messily, assembling ideas from development economics, reflections on practice, disputes around policy, and the effects of education on political, economic, social and cultural facets of development. The approach taken by Simon McGrath and Qing Gu, in putting together this collection of essays, has been to give only a light touch to systematise or organise the discussion of the field of enquiry. They have chosen to represent a multiplicity of perspectives on what constitutes the development space, what forms of methodology can best elucidate the connection of education with this space, and how diverse the sites of education are.

Charles Darwin, in a famous letter to Joseph Hooker in 1857 on how to think about delineating the organisation of species, divided approaches between lumpers, who sought to group things together, and splitters who sought to distinguish what set things apart. McGrath and Gu have gone with the flow of the splitters. They have thus reflected international education and development as having many facets. There is much of value in this approach. It brings us essays which present a range of views of the field. Thus there are chapters that stress economic relations, for example, Milan Thomas and Nicholas Burnett on human capital theory, and Hugh Lauder and Philip Brown on economic globalisation and skills. In addition there are those that consider normative questions in relation to this area of enquiry, such as Joan Dejaeghere on the capability approach and gender, Melanie Walker on higher education and the public good, Clive Harber on democratisation, peace and violence, and Simon McGrath and Lesley Powell on vocational education and human development. The collection looks inside particular relationships of learning and teaching in all kinds of institutions, ranging widely from early childhood education, through various forms of schooling, higher education, adult and vocational education and considers some of the effects of these different phases on development. The collection nods towards some of the disputes around private and public provision, with an article about the relevance of low cost private schools by James Tooley, and a detailed examination of some of the relationships forged in public-private partnerships by Alexandra Draxler. The policy terrain is represented by a plethora of articles which deal with global frameworks, and national interpretation. But there is little consideration of how they may speak to or past each other, although the changing priorities of organisations like the World Bank around which levels of education are worth supporting are noted by the editors in their Conclusion. The rationale for splitting different sections or chapters is largely descriptive. Thus a small number of perspectival fields are identified, which are loosely economic or normative, and a number of fields of practice in different phases of education are distinguished. However the rationale for these boundaries and why some areas are included (schools, technical colleges, universities, literacy projects) but others (social media, the press, faith and ethnic associations) are ignored is not substantially argued.

Thus the book holds up a mirror to a field of inquiry that is diffuse. But, in doing so it leaves us asking a number of questions. Firstly, the selection of perspectives beg many questions. While the selection made, for any collection of this kind will be partial, what has driven the partiality? The editors excuse the lack of presentation or engagement with Southern Theory as the outcome of the logics of

contemporary academic production. But this is a substantial gap in their intention to portray the pluriverse of work in this field. The extensive contributions of diverse scholars, who either articulate positions on Southern Theory, or write from locations in the global south appears a major omission. Secondly, there is no engagement with the whole field of ideas associated with post development, post structural and post colonial critiques. Sociological analyses of different kinds of education relationships are also a striking gap. In their conclusion the editors assemble a range of ideas of what development is for and how one might position education in this. But the critiques of these accounts, and the difficult position of education in these critiques is not canvassed. Thirdly, while international organisations are described, for example in Pauline Rose's review of 25 years of Education for All, we do not get a sense of how these bodies have shaped this field of inquiry, and how their roles have been contested or engaged. Lastly, the editors do not very rigorously consider the question of what kind of lumping together might have been useful and why. Thus, a more systematic consideration of how human capital theory has been considered, rejected or adapted by a range of writers in this area would have helped us learn about some of the debates in this area of economics, their methodological and political influences and implications, not just what their core assumptions are. A consideration of how the capability approach has been interpreted in large international organisations, such as UNICEF and the World Bank, and in small civil society organisations, might have helped illuminate what happens to normative ideas when they meet the practice of international education. Themes that remind us of how divided the world is, economically, politically, socially, and how fragile the multilateral institutions and their networks to nation states might also have been useful.

These comments raise questions regarding the purpose of a Handbook. This can be a crucial 'one stop shop' for students and researchers. The editors have chosen to reflect the field, as it is. But in order to take our insight further forward we need some deeper thinking. A different project might have sought to develop our insight into why international education and development takes this form historically. What processes of political and disciplinary inclusion, exclusion and power are at work? How have they been resisted, and with what effects?

Education is a crucial resource for the SDG (Sustainable Development Goals) project, whether one understands this project as a policy text or a site of practice. Education has its own Goal (SDG 4), is mentioned in a number of other goals and targets, and is clearly recognised in the SDG approach as a cross cutting theme, as noted in the most recent volume of the UNESCO *Global Education Monitor* (UNESCO, 2016) But what political, normative, economic or sociological ideas underpin this recontextualisation of education from a periphery area of practice in schools, to a form of glue that holds together a massive project of development ambition nationally and internationally. Until we have some larger and more systematically explored ways of framing this relationship with development, not just as mind maps, but through sustained scholarship, we are likely to go on splitting into smaller and smaller areas of activity, randomly delineated by communities of policy and practice. The achievement of this book has been to assemble some key writings in this field of inquiry and demonstrate its diversity. A next step for thinking and research will be to try for a more systematic investigation into key areas of lumping which appear particularly relevant to the contemporary moment of international education and whether or not the SDGs or other kinds of exchanges will flourish or crumble. Some key areas in which the field needs much more sustained work concern equalities, intersectionality, nationalism the struggles for sustainability, interdisciplinarity, and the relationship with comparison. This appears a moment where lumping might be more fruitful, before we are pulled again to the many corners advocated by splitting.

Reference

UNESCO , 2016, *Education for People and Planet* Paris: UNESCO