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BOOK REVIEW

Learning, Marginalization, and Improving the Quality of Education in Low-income Countries
edited by Daniel A. Wagner, Nathan M. Castillo, and Suzanne Grant Lewis
Open Book Publishers, 2022. 488 pages
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Since the inception of the UN Millennium Development Goals in 2000, the world has made significant progress in improving access to education and school enrollment rates at all levels. In *Learning, Marginalization, and Improving the Quality of Education in Low-income Countries,* Daniel Wagner, Nathan Castillo, and Suzanne Grant Lewis pay special attention to those who are still lagging. They capture the specific realities of children and youth who remain out of school, or are in school but not learning; namely, those who are learning at the bottom of the pyramid due to poverty or their marginal status in low-income countries (LICs). This publication is a compilation of papers on those learning at the bottom of the pyramid, which were presented at a virtual conference hosted by the University of Pennsylvania and IIEP-UNESCO in December 2020. It should be of great interest to scholars and practitioners in the field of education in emergencies, as many learners in emergency contexts overlap with those learning at the bottom of the pyramid.

There are two sections in this edited volume. The first discusses the various thematic issues related to learning at the bottom of the pyramid. In chapters 1 and 2, Pisani and Dowd and Kelcey, Guven, and Burde, respectively, shed light on these learners by identifying who they are and what their challenges have been relative to learning. They outline personal factors such as gender, disability, and language, as well as migration status; discuss how these factors negatively affect learning outcomes; and describe how they have been dealt with at the country level.

Akyeampong (chap. 3) and Castillo, Adam, and Haßler (chap. 4) focus on teachers and the use of education technology (ed tech) in learning in low-income contexts. They argue the importance of teaching at the right level and discuss

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1   Available from https://www.openbookpublishers.com/books/10.11647/obp.0256.

how countries have difficulty training teachers to do so. They then address how ed tech could support teachers and fill in this gap. The remaining chapters in this section approach the topic at the macro level. Crouch and Slade (chap. 5) and Van Damme, Prokic-Breuer, and Vermeulen (chap. 6) present different ways of assessing and measuring learning at the bottom of the pyramid, and Al-Samarrai and Benveniste (chap. 7) call for an equitable approach to education financing.

Section 2 of the volume mainly depicts several case scenarios and delineates how differently learning at the bottom of the pyramid manifests in various country contexts. Four countries are featured as examples: Mexico (chap. 8), India (chaps. 9-11), Côte d'Ivoire (chaps. 12-13), and Kenya (chaps. 14-17). These chapters include analyses of the learners at the bottom of the pyramid, their learning-related challenges, and the policies countries have designed and implemented to improve learning outcomes.

One of the main takeaways the coeditors intend to deliver through this volume is the targeted learning approach, also referred to as "contextualized targeting" or "differentiated strategy" (p. 15), that learners at the bottom of the pyramid need in order to improve their learning outcomes. For such an approach to be sustained over time and ultimately "raise the floor" (p. 4) for poorly performing learners, the coeditors emphasize the importance of a holistic or "system-wide approach" (p. 49). The coeditors note that, when designing a program, educators must go beyond simply factoring in gender, disability, or any other marginalizing individual characteristics. They call for more equitable education systems and societies in which learners with disadvantaged backgrounds can thrive. A few contributors to this book argue that many projects are carried out piecemeal and fail to address the deeply entrenched inequalities, thus having little impact.

Taking a targeted approach at the classroom level is known as teaching at the right level, which entails instruction being "tailored to meet abilities or learning levels rather than students' ages and grades" (p. 84). There is plenty of empirical evidence on the effectiveness of this approach, particularly for low-performing students and in LICs. However, Akyeampong (chap. 3) observes that implementation challenges remain, including professional training for teachers, which is critical to successful learning. Many teacher education programs in LICs do not support the targeted approach and only prepare teachers with "a set of homogenized strategies" or "decontextualized teaching" (p. 99), which does not account for diverse student needs. However, these inadequate approaches are inevitable, considering that many teachers in LICs "have not mastered the school subjects they teach" and, therefore, "their basic pedagogical knowledge can… be weak" (p. 101).

Ed tech appears in various points throughout the volume as a promising solution to education problems. In Côte d'Ivoire (chap. 13), for example, a program "teaching at the right level" used simple messaging apps, such as WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. This enabled the teachers to stay connected with their pedagogical advisors, ask questions if needed, and receive supporting teaching and learning materials. Adaptive technology is featured in the book as having potential for personalized learning. It is shown to have greater impact than other interventions, such as reducing class size or increasing teacher pay in sub-Saharan Africa (p. 353). However, the importance of aligning the use of ed tech with the desired educational changes the program intends to achieve cannot be emphasized enough. In a similar vein, Castillo, Adam, and Haßler (chap. 4) stress that technology must be guided by the primary objective—improving learning outcomes: "Programs are most effective when they take a problem-first approach rather than a techno-solutionist approach, i.e., when they focus on addressing barriers to improved learning outcomes rather than merely digitizing the learning environment" (p. 115).

The biggest value added this edited volume contributes to the field of education in emergencies is the wide variety of thematic angles the contributors bring to the core topic of learning at the bottom of the pyramid. The book is unique in that the discussion takes place at both the conceptual level (theory) and on the ground (implementation), and the overall scope is not limited to naming who these disadvantaged students are. It also explores different ways of measuring learning inequalities, documenting the initiatives in LICs, and distilling the lessons learned for other countries. This volume will, without a doubt, serve as a cornerstone for reaching those who are still left behind—the last mile of the Sustainable Development Goals. I hope the valuable inputs offered by the contributors, who come from many different walks of life, will help to define concrete next steps in improving learning at the bottom of the pyramid.

That said, the volume would be more useful for the field of education in emergencies if some or all of the contributors had focused explicitly on the experiences of teachers and students in contexts of crisis and conflict. Moreover, the book would have been strengthened by having a concluding chapter in which the rich findings are analyzed as a whole. This also would have provided space for the editors to explicitly call on the international education community to act on the five high-level items to effectively reach learners at the bottom of the pyramid, suggested by Hinton and Kazmi: (1) Face the reality of the learning crisis; (2) Collect data to understand the problem; (3) Take action based on evidence of what is most

likely to work; (4) Support governments to implement effectively at scale; and (5) Research the drivers of scale.

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