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S. Webb, J. Holford, S. Hodge, M Milana & R. Waller

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Conceptualising lifelong learning for sustainable development and education 2030

Lifelong learning has been identified as crucial to the achievement of sustainable development and quality education in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. By incorporating the need to promote lifelong learning opportunities for all in the sustainable development goal 4 (SDG4), which was agreed by the United Nations member states in 2015, policy makers have recognised that education should reach beyond the formal institutional arrangements of primary, secondary and tertiary (or higher education). How, though, is lifelong learning being conceptualised in the practices of nations as they report progress on achievements towards these goals? Engaging with this question has concerned a number of writers in this journal. Moreover, since several countries have now reported their progress towards the SDGs after three years of activity, it is timely to consider how they have addressed this question.

In 2018, Milana, Webb, Holford, Waller and Jarvis (2018, p. 1) contended that ‘adult education, adult learning, lifelong education and lifelong learning are entangled activities that have differently captured academic, political and practical attention over time and space ... This frequently results in intangible conceptual tensions between adult education, adult learning, lifelong education and lifelong learning, which affect the very object of academic inquiry, and its investigation’, and the policy and practice attention that is given to these concepts, we would add. Starting from this perspective that there are conceptual tensions, this editorial considers how lifelong learning is being understood in policy and practice now that nations are reporting publicly their progress towards the SDGs.

The concern that will be considered here is that as others have argued, adult education has disappeared from international documents and programmes which have been designed to achieve education goals and the implementation of the SDGs (Orlovic Lovren and Popovic 2018). How has this happened at a time when lifelong learning has been identified as an important additional focus for international attention to build on the millennial development goals targeted at universal primary education? In reviewing the MDGs, the UNESCO ‘Global report on adult learning and education’ highlighted research evidence that demonstrated the importance of adults and their own learning in changing the practices of families (UIL, 2010). Furthermore, the international shift in developing sustainable development goals supposedly broadened the role of education and lifelong learning to recognise that cultural factors, learning by all (including adults) and political choices underpin the achievement of sustainability (Filho, Manolas, & Pace, 2015). Thus the focus on sustainability, the ‘problem object’ was widened from being conceived as a problem of development and the responsibility of those nations that needed to catch up, to one that was conceived to be a global problem to which all nations must contribute solutions. Yet lifelong learning, as many have noted, is a slippery term (see Field, 2006), which can be shaped to suit many different policies and practices as the following argues:

While lifelong learning “holds” the high position as SDG 4, adult education is taken off the agenda. Only adult literacy and vocational education are excerpted as clear targets related to adults (and part of the target related to gender equality), which puts at risk the entire SDG agenda, since achieving (in a sustainable way) several other goals does depend on extensive use of adult education. (Orlovic Lovren & Popovic, 2018, p. 13)

To illustrate this argument further, we now turn to discuss one of the voluntary national reviews from Australia submitted to the UN in 2018 (DFAT 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In relation to the SDG 4 that aims to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all, the Australian report comprises two main documents, one that reports on progress and one containing a narrative summary of activities. The progress report (DFAT 2018a) identifies the eleven indicators developed internationally for this goal and uses a traffic light system to report on progress using the colours green to show achievement of the indicator, amber for making progress and red for not making progress. Language and visuals can be powerful signifiers and rhetorical devices that shape the way we read texts. By using a colour coding mechanism to report progress in which in this case, green and amber are predominant, the message given is that Australia is meeting the international targets for SDG 4. Data has been provided on-line for 45 % of the goal and progress on this indicator is presented as green, while a further four indicators (35% of the goal) are presented as amber because Australia is exploring the data sources to report on these activities. However, two indicators are identified as not applicable. These are as follows: indicator 4.2.1 'Proportion of children under 5 years of age who are developmentally on track in health, learning and psychosocial well-being, by sex' and 4.7.1 'Extent to which (i) global citizenship education and (ii) education for sustainable development, including gender equality and human rights, are mainstreamed at all levels in (a) national education policies; (b) curricula; (c) teacher education; and (d) student assessment'. In explaining its approach to data for reporting, the Australian Government states that it intends to report only on indicators that are considered 'relevant or applicable to the Australian context' (DFAT, 2018c). The reason given for some indicators being considered not applicable is that at present there is no internationally agreed methodology or data set for reporting these matters.

The narrative report is also interesting in relation to what is included and what is not. Spanning over three pages of text, lifelong learning is mentioned twice, once in relation to the overall goal where it is claimed 'efforts include building lifelong learning opportunities and supporting workforce participation' (DFAT 2018b, p. 36). The second occurrence is in a sentence stating 'There is a broad range of community institutions, which provide and promote lifelong learning and adult and community education, delivering foundation skills training' (DFAT (Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade), 2018b, p. 36). Again, it is notable that this sentence is the only reference given to adult education and the remark ties this practice to a narrow understanding of adult education as solely related to the provision of foundation skills. Adults are also mentioned in one other place in the text where 'programs to support education outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in remote areas' are mentioned and in this context too, the reference is in relation to the 'provision of essential infrastructure such as computers, printers and internet access points to improve internet literacy and educational outcomes' for these populations (DFAT (Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade), 2018b, p. 37). The minimal attention given to adults and their learning is remarkable. Firstly, in relation to the development of vocational education and training and higher education, given the research evidence and policy expectation that adults will need to undertake further qualifications across their life course to be prepared for employment restructuring and changes in labour markets (Shah & Dixon, 2018). Secondly, in relation to the global actions identified to leave no-one behind in the Indo-Pacific region, the focus is exclusively on young people in spite of evidence from the reviews of the MDGs that adult education is crucial to lifting the education level of the young in these regions (UIL, 2010). And thirdly, in relation to the indicator 4.7.1 in which education for citizenship and sustainability is regarded as essential to underpin many other SDGs, it is surprising that this indicator is reported to be not applicable and no commentary is made about this in the summary narrative because international criteria to measure this have not been agreed.

Although, this analysis of just one voluntary national report on progress towards SDG 4 three years on from the development of goals for Education 2030 is brief, arguably it reflects growing discussion and concerns in the field of adult education and lifelong education and learning. These discussions have highlighted the potential opportunity for adult education and lifelong learning that the broader project could engender (Milana et al., 2017), but also concerns that narrow conceptualisations of the field of lifelong learning is leading to the neglect of adult education in the Education 2030 policy and practice (Orlovic Lovren & Popovic, 2018). Lifelong learning and adult education when mentioned are framed solely through the lens of foundation skills – literacy and numeracy and computer literacy. The bold expectation that Education 2030 for Sustainability would encompass learning throughout life to support citizenship education in order to enable opportunities for all and participation in the complex decision making that will be required to develop a sustainable world seems unlikely to be realised if adult education and lifelong learning is so narrowly conceived.

So what next? National reporting on progress towards Education 2030 is ongoing. The example from Australia shows that the reporting mechanism is tied closely to the data available and that at present there is no agreed international data on citizenship education. We also know there is a growing body of literature showing the power of international organisations and the conceptual frameworks they use to define educational activity shapes the types of data collected by nations and in turn shapes policies and practices (Addey, 2018; Rubenson, 2018). If researchers and practitioners are to influence our understanding and the implementation of Education 2030, more research studies that explore critically how lifelong learning is understood in current policies and practice and how the wider purposes of adult education can be captured, distilled, shared and reported internationally, are vital.

Disclosure statement

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S. Webb

Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

 susan.webb@monash.edu  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0833-959X>

J. Holford

School of Education, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1666-4525>

S. Hodge

School of Education and Professional Studies, Griffith University, Queensland, Australia

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1194-5208>

M Milana

di Filosofia Pedagogia e Psicologia, Università degli Studi di Verona, Verona, Italy

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3068-3530>

R. Waller

Department of Education and Childhood, University of the West of England, Bristol, UK

 <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0697-3183>