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The normative practitioner

Blaak, Marit

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The normative practitioner

Adding value to organisational learning in
education NGOs in Uganda

Colophon

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university of
 groningen

The normative practitioner

Adding value to organisational learning in education NGOs in Uganda

PhD thesis

to obtain the degree of PhD at the
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on the authority of the
Rector Magnificus Prof. C. Wijmenga
and in accordance with
the decision by the College of Deans.

This thesis will be defended in public on

Thursday 4 November 2021 at 16.15 hours

by

Marit Blaak

born on 15 July 1987
in Hoogezand-Sappemeer

Supervisors

Prof. J.J.M. Zeelen

Prof. G.L. Openjuru

Assessment committee

Prof. H. H. Haisma

Prof. S. McGrath

Prof. A. Bailey

Wisdom is like a baobab tree; no individual can embrace it.

African proverb

For wisdom is far more valuable than rubies. Nothing you desire can compare with it.

Proverbs 8:11 NLT

Preface

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic triggered mass reflection on the viability of our global economic and political models. Citizens, scholars, vloggers, activists, and policy makers were taking stock of what the neoliberal, turbo-capitalist global economy and society have achieved and for whom, as well as which problems it created. Confronted with a pandemic that took away certainties and paused day-to-day routines, people started dreaming of alternative futures that are greener, juster, and richer – looking beyond material wealth. Like many educationists, however, these questions were on my mind long before the COVID-19 pandemic. In the field of lifelong learning for development, my colleagues and I had often wondered: is this it? Is this all we can do for lifelong learners in Uganda?

When these questions came up early in my career a seed was planted for the PhD research that is documented in this book. My first official job was a leadership position in an education NGO in Uganda. With the little project management experience gained during a traineeship in South Sudan and a load of optimism about the potential of my 'book knowledge', I was very keen to jump into this new role and deliver education programmes to youth and adults in one of the most underserved regions of the country. However, the more I learned about the project, the more questions I had: during the three years of project implementation, why had the work plan never been adjusted to fit the realities on the ground? Why was there no conversation between the implementing partners and the multi-lateral donor about budget changes needed even though the grant contract allowed for these changes? I realised that the insights we gained on the ground did not 'travel up'. We simply continued ticking boxes following a project plan that had been set three years back. After ten months on the job and trying to lobby for change, I felt like I had reached a dead end. I was not able to act on the knowledge my team and I had accumulated, nor could I integrate innovations that had emerged in the field of lifelong learning. I also questioned why I, a white young woman with minimum relevant work experience, had been given this leadership role. Frustrated that we were not able to do the 'right thing' I left the role.

Through the various jobs I have held since, I realised that the limitations I had initially experienced were not unique to that particular NGO or to me as a person. Rather, what emerged were recurring patterns of NGOs' inability to act on knowledge or deepen

knowledge amidst the numerous conflicting demands and prescriptive funding requirements. These limitations frustrated me intensely, because like Edwards (1997) I had assumed that learning what works and what does not is a *sine qua non* for development organisations. It was perplexing that highly competent people and organisations were not always acting based on the knowledge available inside and outside of the organisation.

In 2015, I actively started engaging other practitioners from education NGOs in Uganda in investigating this problem. We quickly agreed that the way we learn can be improved. Practitioners shared how information does not always translate into learning, knowledge does not always move from the field to decision-makers, and there was a fear of making mistakes, among other issues. Within the context of my PhD research, a communicative space developed in which practitioners and scholars explored 'the way things are done'. Instead of looking at our programmes and their outcomes, we looked inside our organisations to establish how organisational learning is shaped and whether this could help explain gaps in lifelong learning programming. Our exploration turned into a five-year journey which involved several education NGOs in Uganda, as well as communities on the 'receiving end' of NGO programmes.

Our collaborative inquiry resulted in an intimate account of how practitioners collect, analyse and use information and knowledge from and with their learners and community actors in order to provide relevant lifelong learning interventions. We experimented with double-loop learning methods to explore how organisational learning could contribute to transforming not only the way things are done, but also why things are done a certain way. These critical reflections also revealed the limitations of dominant paradigms in the lifelong learning for development sector and the way aid and international development is organised. This work illustrates how these grand narratives interplay with the day-to-day decisions practitioners make when facilitating learning experiences for communities in Uganda. The work also contributes towards a contextualised theory of double-loop learning for education NGOs, but most of all aims at providing practical insights that inspire transformative change.

As I finalise this thesis, the world is imagining how we can #BuildBackBetter after the COVID-19 pandemic. Ideas are emerging to ensure social and economic systems are more resilient and more capable of securing the well-being of all citizens. Education and learning systems are also the subject of a bold re-imagining. When schools and education institutions re-open, should we go back to the 'old ways'? Or should we look for systems

that serve all and bring about more holistic learning outcomes to equip people to live together? At its core, organisational learning is about the capability to re-imagine what education and learning interventions could achieve and to identify action strategies to build better futures. In this thesis, I present normative perspectives on education and learning, as well as ambitions to be critically adaptive; I hope these will guide educationists, managers, funders, and community leaders on how to shape spaces to reflect continuously and critically and to identify what is right in the particular context they work in for all learners, including those at-risk.

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