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More and better teachers: making the slogan a reality

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Teacher issues are climbing ever higher on the education agenda worldwide, in the drive to make the right to quality basic education for all a reality. One illustration of the increased policy attention is the endorsement of a Task Force on Teachers for EFA by the participants at the eighth High-Level Group meeting on EFA in December 2008 (www.teachersforefa.unesco.org/v2/index.php/en). But despite the wide agreement that more and better teachers are needed, how to make this slogan a reality remains open for discussion. In this concluding chapter, we sum up lessons from the preceding chapters. First, we discuss how this volume can contribute to the discussion and debate on teacher issues. We then present a set of suggestions that can help guide policy, planning and action. These suggestions are framed around the two main determinants of teaching quality: the teacher’s knowledge and skills, and the teacher’s motivation and effort.

10.1 The contribution of this volume to the ongoing discussion

From the preceding chapters, it is clear that teacher issues are complex and much more than a numbers game. Teacher issues go far beyond what is often the focus of policy discussions, i.e. teacher education and continuing professional development. They include also issues of status, working conditions (including compensation and social and physical security), and management (including recruitment, selection, deployment, career advancement, motivation, incentives and retention). Addressing these issues is quite challenging as they are all interrelated.

Teachers are men and women with their own identities, experiences and priorities through which their professional and personal concerns and needs are constructed. They play
a wide range of social roles—mothers, fathers, sons, daughters, community leaders, for example. They may take up more overtly political roles as human rights activists, social change agents and/or vocal advocates for quality education. Teachers assume diverse positions in a range of social, political and economic institutions, organisations and structures, as well as within schools and education systems—in families and kinship structures, community organisations, community leadership structures, savings schemes, collective garden groups, even military or paramilitary structures.

What does all this have to do with teacher policy? It is true that these relations, affiliations, cultural, religious and other values and beliefs are constructed in and through the varied positions and roles we might describe as ‘personal’. However, these in turn affect and shape teachers’ professional sense of teacher identity, their ‘teacherness’. Teachers affected or infected by HIV-AIDS, for example, have status, health, financial and family security issues to address while continuing to work as teachers—and maybe even to address through their work as teachers.

Teachers’ professional and personal roles and relations are also shaped by broader contextual factors related to the social, political and economic milieu in which they live and work. Teachers living in conflict-affected contexts, for example, are forced to prioritise their own survival and security, especially where their ethnicity, religion, political or trade union affiliation casts them on one particular ‘side’. The chilling statistics on political violence against teachers reported by Novelli (chapter 6, this volume) are illustrative in this respect and remind us that teachers are political actors (Ginsburg and Kamat, 2009; Ginsburg and Lindsay, 1995), whether or not they define themselves as such.

Many teachers in emergency or post-crisis situations have not chosen to become teachers. Instead, the situation has compelled them to enter the profession: they have responded to the needs of the community and to the lack of other livelihood opportunities by becoming ‘spontaneous’ teachers. Unfortunately, this also means that they are often ‘tentative’ teachers with a fragile professional identity (Kirk and Winthrop, chapter 7, this volume; Winthrop and Kirk, 2005). For those teachers whose schools have been devastated by earthquakes or other natural disasters, the professional challenges of teaching in a tent or in the open are matched by the personal challenges of rebuilding their own homes and their families’ livelihoods. There are also teachers working in fragile states in which chronic under-funding, corruption and political interference impact heavily on their personal and professional lives. In all these contexts, the vulnerabilities of women teachers, especially to sexual violence, are often overlooked.

Even in contexts of relative normalcy, women teachers must deal with challenges that affect their work and career. As reported by Dilshad Ashraf (chapter 9, this volume), women working as teachers or head teachers in the northern areas of Pakistan have to negotiate various interconnected professional and personal situations through compliance and resistance to a complex set of local gender norms. Local gender norms constrain the work
and career of women teachers in other developing country contexts as well. In light of evidence of the positive impact of women teachers on girls’ education (Kirk, 2008a), there are clear reasons to set gender balance as an important policy objective and take steps to ensure that women who embrace teaching can enjoy a rewarding career—including adequate compensation, professional development and career advancement opportunities—just like their male colleagues.

Research and policy studies related to teachers, however, have so far tended to separate systems from individuals—especially in developing country contexts, where much less attention is paid to teacher background and identity. Systems analysis and consideration of issues such as teacher supply, demand, pre-service education and continuing professional development usually remain separated from studies of teachers’ classroom, family and community experiences. Discussions of the gendered nature of teachers’ lives and work, perceptions and motivations and of the impacts of the different forces of globalisation, experiences of violence and living in conflict contexts take place elsewhere; the role of teachers’ unions in both technical and contractual issues is also rarely considered.

Systems-level strategies to increase and improve the teaching force need to be informed by consideration of teachers’ lived experiences. As Rogers and Vegas argue (chapter 4, this volume), for example, teacher absenteeism is a system-level issue that seriously impacts the quality of education, but effective policy cannot be developed without understanding why teachers are absent in the first place and what the barriers to regular attendance are. Other critical teacher and teacher management issues that demand interconnected micro- and macro-level analysis include teacher compensation (how much and how to pay teachers and para-teachers in relation to relative salary levels, the supply of potential teachers and social attitudes towards teachers and teaching); teacher education and support (how to promote quality education, especially with limited resources and underqualified teachers); teachers’ sexuality and HIV/AIDS (teachers’ own experiences of living with the disease or with caring for those affected by it, and their relative comfort levels with talking about sex and sexual activity with students, with peers); and measures to address gender disparities in the teaching profession (understanding the complex gender roles and relations that men and women have in families, communities and other institutions and organisations and understanding the different opportunities and limitations they might have in promoting gender equality).

In light of the foregoing, we argue that a more dynamic and comprehensive framework in which to situate teachers and teacher management issues can support improved education planning and management and improved teacher and teacher management outcomes. UNESCO’s Teacher Training Initiative for Sub-Saharan Africa (TTISSA) is a promising initiative in this respect (see Pontefract, Bonnet, and Vivekanandan, chapter 2, this volume). This chapter and the others provide important building blocks in the development of more teacher-centred policies, especially in the critical contexts of sub-Saharan Africa.
and South and West Asia, where the need for new teachers is the most intense. We now turn to a discussion of some of these building blocks.

10.2 Ensuring that teachers have the right knowledge and skills

To a large extent, what society expects from schools is what it expects from teachers, for what students learn at school ultimately depends on their interactions with their teacher(s) in the classroom. (For a useful discussion of the importance of teacher-student interactions, see Samoff, 2007.) The content and quality of these interactions in turn depend largely on what teachers know and can do. Ensuring that teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to foster effective student learning is therefore of paramount importance. The question is how, where and when to help teachers acquire these skills and knowledge. If in general there is agreement on the need for some form of teacher education and for organised teacher development opportunities, the same cannot be said about their content, length, location and the like, or about the resources to be devoted to them.

Surprisingly, given the large amounts of money spent on teacher education and training, there are no definitive answers to these questions yet (see, for instance, Darling-Hammond, 2002, versus Walsh, 2002; Schvile and Dembébé, 2007; Wilson, Floden, and Ferrini-Mundy, 2001). To be sure, there are inherent difficulties in answering these questions, given that schooling, teaching and teacher education must adapt to societal changes and differences. Indeed, answers to these questions likely vary over time even within the same country.

In most developing countries, following the 1990 EFA conference and in response to demand and cost, two interrelated trends have emerged: (1) a shift towards a contractualisation model (not entirely a position-based model) for managing teacher employment, away from the career-based model that had been dominant before; and (2) a reduction in the length and importance of teacher preparation in favour of continuing professional development. These trends are not without consequences, as Dembébé and Mellouki discuss in chapter 3. They call for improving teacher preparation, “instead of either reducing its length to a point where it is difficult to do anything worth while or abandoning it altogether because of its alleged or documented ineffectiveness and related costs”. Teacher preparation, they argue, is all the more important as it may be “the only structured professional learning opportunity for most teachers posted in [rural and hard-to-reach] areas”—the very areas where the struggle for universal primary education must ultimately be won. In other words, there is a need to evaluate the implications and effectiveness of the accelerated or alternative models of teacher preparation that many developing countries have adopted since the early 1990s, with the goal of identifying possible improvements.
Regardless of programme length, effective teacher learning (at both the pre-service and in-service levels) requires placing teachers at the centre of their own learning, argue Kirk and Winthrop (chapter 7) and Pithouse-Morgan et al. (chapter 5). A teacher-centered approach entails paying attention to teachers’ own voices or stories, to who they really are, to the forces and factors that motivate and demotivate them, and to the challenges that affect their basic well-being. This approach is not totally new. What is new is the move away from the deficit model of teacher training to one where more complex configurations of personal and professional needs, desires, perspectives and priorities are recognised, as in the International Rescue Committee’s Healing Classroom Initiative described by Kirk and Winthrop. What is also new is Pithouse-Morgan et al.’s argument for arts-based approaches such as “participatory videos, photo-messages, drawings or pieces of autobiographical writing”, to foster participation and self-reflection among both prospective and practicing teachers. Pithouse-Morgan et al. have successfully used such approaches to enhance prospective as well as practicing teachers’ engagement with sexuality and HIV- and AIDS-related issues across a range of subject areas in South Africa. It seems reasonable to expect that they could be used successfully in other contexts and to deal with other issues that may merit inclusion in the curriculum, such as environmental degradation, cultural diversity, social exclusion, conflicts and peace.

As noted above, one obstacle to devising teacher education and continuing professional development programmes is the paucity of rigorous evidence about the effectiveness of different types of programmes in different contexts. (For a discussion of why such evidence is not readily available and what needs to be done, see Schwille and Dembélé, 2007, pp. 53–58.) This means that governments and NGOs often have to rely on anecdotal information on what training approach might be effective, even in ‘normal’ settings; the problem is greater in emergency or conflict settings, where even less careful evaluation work has been done. This is a strong argument for building evaluation into new programmes such as the arts-based approaches, to allow learning from experience and redesign of the programmes where necessary.

10.3 Ensuring teacher effort

In their chapter in this volume (chapter 4), Rogers and Vegas use a notion that we find useful in considering teacher effectiveness. It is the notion of teacher effort, which encompasses the time and thought that teachers put into teaching, including class preparation. Rogers and Vegas rightly argue that “better skills [and knowledge] have no effect on learning if the teacher does not make the effort to use them”—so policymakers need to pay attention to teachers’ effort, and not just their skills.

In developing countries in particular, teacher attendance is a necessary condition for student learning, as well as a basic but illuminating indicator of teacher effort. To ensure teacher effort therefore requires, first and foremost, ensuring attendance—or, to turn the
problem around, documenting absence, understanding its causes and identifying steps to address it. In different contexts, teachers’ attendance may have to do with one or several of the following interrelated factors: compensation and benefits, status, management practices, opportunities for professional development, opportunities and mechanisms for career progression, working and living conditions, physical protection and well-being.

Among these factors, teacher compensation appears as the most complex one to deal with. The teacher wage bill looms large in government calculations, because it typically represents two thirds or more of the recurrent education budget. The shift in teacher employment management and the reduction of the length of professional preparation essentially aim to increase teacher supply while controlling the wage bill. While this aim is understandable, low salaries are likely to reduce the morale of incumbent teachers, while also worsening the image of the profession in the society. As a result, teachers may make less effort, and the profession will likely find it harder to attract motivated and high-quality entrants into the teaching corps. As Brannelly and Ndaruhutse (chapter 8) have argued, there is no definitive solution to the problem of teacher compensation, for it highly depends on the employer’s capacity to pay in a given context. They note that situations of fragility or emergency are even more complex, and they offer three principles for acting in those situations: responsiveness, appropriateness and coordination. Part of the complexity is that, as Rogers and Vegas note, higher salaries may not always improve the day-to-day incentives of teachers to exert effort, so compensation policy needs to be complemented by effective teacher management and support.

Thus the issue of teacher compensation is closely linked with that of status or employment management. In light of the trends observed in several countries, the suggestion made by Dembélé and Mellouki (chapter 3) needs to be taken seriously. It is indeed important to clarify the terms of coexistence of the hybrid position-based model that is now dominant in many countries and the career-based model in decline since the 1990s. The policy question to be addressed is: What appropriate balance can be made between the two models? Put differently, what proportion of contract teachers is desirable in an education system? Answering this question implies also dealing with the issue of career development possibilities for this type of teachers, bearing in mind that in the absence of such possibilities attrition may increase, thus threatening stability and the development of collective expertise in the teaching force.

It is also important that the teaching force be equitably distributed across an education system (in terms of both quantity and quality of teachers) and that this be done in a transparent fashion. Ineffective and non-transparent management practices can and do influence whether or not teachers make the effort expected of them.

Gender balance is yet another aspect to take into account in the formation and management of a teaching force. For women teachers, this may require special measures such as single-sex training and professional development opportunities, as well as the establish-
ment of childcare facilities within schools, particularly in conservative contexts (Dilshad Ashraf, chapter 9; Kirk and Winthrop, chapter 7, this volume).

10.4 Concluding remarks

The outlook of the existing teaching force is a powerful pull-or-push factor for high-calibre candidates to the profession. This calls for education authorities to be mindful of how they treat teachers. Effective education systems are typically those that manage to attract well-qualified entrants into the teaching profession and also to motivate those who are already teaching. In the long run, we believe that the goal of teacher policy should be to build a truly professional teaching corps—one composed primarily of teachers who have the skills and training of professionals, who are treated like professionals in terms of salary, support and working conditions, and who also are required to meet high expectations in terms of their commitment and motivation.

Different countries and settings will require different paths towards this goal, which will likely be compatible with different institutional structures. The road will sometimes be a tortuous one, especially in emergency and conflict situations, or even in ‘normal’ situations where universal primary education has yet to be achieved. In such cases, the immediate objective will often simply be to get teachers into the classroom. Even in those cases, the recommendations discussed above—together with a focus on student learning and student welfare—can help guide the way.