

# Teachers and Teaching: What We Have Learned in 50 Years

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**Keywords:** Teachers in developing countries; Teacher policy; Education assistance to teachers

**Summary:** Teacher professionalism has proven in the past to be an essential element in the sustainability of an education system under financial and political stress. However, some current teacher policies may create crippling inefficiencies and be counterproductive to educational quality.

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Teachers have been recognized as critical for decades. For example, in a study of Ugandan school achievement in 1971 the quality of teachers was found to have a profound influence on the achievement of their pupils. Two characteristics were identified specifically: the quality of the English language ability and the level of their curriculum content knowledge (Heyneman, 1975). After a period of fiscal famine in the education sector and the collapse of Idi Amin's government, the same schools were re-visited. In terms of physical facilities they had never been well-endowed, but after the ten-year famine the schools had been stripped bare of anything they had previously owned. Books were gone; copy machines broken; desks had succumbed to weather and insects. What had not disappeared were the teachers. There they were, day after day. What they lacked in materials, they made up with additional time, memory and diligence. Without government pay for over a year, they had been compensated in kind by grateful parents. Through the diligence of the teachers that school achievement, without materials, had actually improved over what it had been ten years earlier (Heyneman, 1983). Similarly, after the economic collapse in the 1990s, in the Russian Federation, there the teachers were again, some so poor that they could not afford the bus fare home and instead had to sleep in their offices (Heyneman, 1997; 1998). There is no doubt that teachers are critical.

But there is another story too. Public school teachers are generally paid with a single salary scale which does not allow teachers with scarce skills or higher performance to be rewarded differently. Governments struggle to cover the cost of teacher pensions, preventing newly-trained teachers from being hired because resources are not sufficient to cover both current and additional obligations. Often teachers are trained at public expense but then cannot be hired as teachers. This wastes the public investment in higher education. And students, seeing a possibility of gaining higher education free of private cost, choose to be trained as teachers without actually wanting to be teachers (Heyneman and Stern, 2012; Heyneman and Stern, 2013). Because the public schools are so often over-crowded, teachers become discouraged and

often stay home instead of teaching. And parents, even poor parents, are sufficiently rational to calculate that having their children in school doing little or nothing is a wasted investment; hence they opt for low fee private schools instead of keeping their children in 'tuition-free' public education. Private schools, expanding rapidly, often use untrained teachers; yet they can outperform public schools in terms of school achievement. This is the story that we have learned (Heyneman and Stern, 2014).

Now the question is about the future. Will governments, in cooperation with development assistance agencies, experiment with teacher policies to address some of these rigidities? Is it possible that the institutional handicaps, obvious to most stakeholders, can be acknowledged openly? Is it possible that teacher associations, which have often argued for maintaining the status quo, can be marshaled as allies to overcome the barriers to school quality? The stakes are important. No matter how much effort and energy are allocated to identifying the problems of learning in the post-2015 agenda, these efforts are meaningless unless the institutional barriers within the teaching profession can be broken.

Three principles should drive our attention. The first is labor market flexibility. Teachers need to be paid more, but selectively. Those with particularly scarce skills, those who agree to teach in hard-to-staff locations, and those whose performance is consistently higher, should be rewarded very well. Teachers should be upgraded constantly, and re-licensed on the basis of their upgraded performance. Teacher pensions should be jointly supported by professional associations, governments and individual teachers. Teacher training should be free of private cost, but the public's investment should be recovered through periods of internship.

The second is being 'technology ready'. Technologies of teaching and learning, including the use of cell phones, are changing rapidly and the costs are now such that even in low income countries these technologies apply. Teacher performance should be integrated with the abilities of teachers to use these technologies effectively.

The third is technology-monitored. Traditionally teaching is an autonomous activity. Each classroom is distant and distinct; schools and teacher attendance are rarely monitored. This allows maximum opportunity for non-participation. Teacher-monitoring technologies are available which would allow the public the confidence that professional teachers were present and available when they should be (Moses, 2014). These elements should not be seen as draconian, but, rather, a normal means of assuring quality. And quality is what education is all about.

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