2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Teacher Professional Skills: Key Strategies to Advance in Better Learning Opportunities in Latin America

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Abstract

It is widely recognized that teaching is a key driver to improve students' learning. The SDG 4 recognizes the importance of teachers and the urgency of having organized systems of pre and in-service training. This policy brief offers policy recommendations related to initial training improvement, introducing highly effective teaching practices, rethinking the use of ICTs and adopting a renewed collaborative approach for teacher professional development from a Latin American perspective. This is particularly relevant in the context of the 2030 agenda which recognizes teacher shortages across the world (UNESCO, 2016) and the need to address the learning crisis (TALIS, 2014).

Challenge

Latin America, as other developing regions, requires a new wave of policies to address the institutional, economic and cultural barriers to improve the teaching profession. Findings provided by the Inter-American Development Bank (2018) in their publication "Profession: Teachers in Latin America: how was teaching prestige lost and how to recover it?", shows that the teaching profession is one of the least socially valued in the region. Amid several problems, teaching salaries in many Latin American countries have not increased as much as in other areas, although access to teacher training programs is almost guaranteed for anyone.

Although policy solutions are here presented as a set of differentiated recommendations, this policy brief stands on the idea that particular policies and practices must be comprehended in a framework that explains the knowledge, practice and professional engagement required across teachers' careers. This means that beyond specific practices, policies regarding teachers' professional development must find a common ground in terms of knowing students and how they learn; the content and how to teach it; the plan and implementation of effective teaching and learning; the creation and maintenance of supportive and safe learning environments; assessment, feedback provision and report on student learning; engagement with professional learning, colleagues, parents/carers and the community. [1]

In relation to this common framework, one of the main challenges to be tackled, is the creation of systems that, on the one hand, attract high performing students to the teaching profession, recognizing the social value that teachers play in a rapidly changing world and that, on the other, ensure the quality and pertinence of pre- and in-service teacher training, focusing on the most effective teaching practices. This implies establishing high quality standards to assess pre- and in-service teacher training programs, finding the optimum balance between subject matter knowledge, teacher dispositions and their pedagogical and professional skills. Along with that, it is critical to make use of the advantages that ICTs offer to reach large amounts of teachers that need to

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[1] Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. (2018) "Australian Professional Standards for Teachers". Carlton South, Australia: Education Services Australia.

develop new critical skills; all of these challenges require adjusting the national institutional frameworks to advance the professionalisation of the teaching career[2].

Proposal

Teacher policies require institutional frameworks with a comprehensive perspective over particular solutions. In this regard, the following recommendations are understood as an interrelated cluster of solutions where training, collaboration, effective practices and the use of ICTs must be jointly addressed by public policies. In terms of Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Garrner and Espinoza (2017), teacher professional development should be envisioned in a wider systemic view related to curriculum, resources, a shared vision, and assessment, among others.

Introducing highly effective teaching practices

The "what works" literature has identified a set of highly effective teaching practices. These practices can be thought of as fundamental capabilities that teachers should master, if they want to be effective in unleashing the potential of their students. These skills should also orient national frameworks to organize not only training programs, but also the national agencies in charge of providing teacher professional development.

Several initiatives across the world have made progress in identifying the most effective teaching practices to transform the teaching and learning experience in order to increase academic performance, educational equity and inclusion[3]. These practices should be promoted with the objective of finding the optimum balance between subject-matter knowledge, teacher dispositions and

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[2] Cumsille, B. Fiszbein, A. (2015) "Building Effective Teacher Policies: Guidelines for action. The Dialogue. https://www.thedialogue.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/EDU-Cumsille-Fiszbein-Spanish-v3.pdf

[3] EEF https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit; SUMMA, https://www.summaedu.org/plataforma-de-practicas-educativas-efectivas/, University of Michigan, Teaching Works Initiative. http://www.teachingworks.org/work-of-teaching/high-leverage-practices

pedagogical and professional skills. These skills, understood as critical competencies for the teaching practice, have been identified as very cost-effective, which should induce policymakers to make the best use of them. The skills teachers need to develop to become effective should include at least these four[4]:

Provide effective feedback: this skill implies giving information (oral or written) to the learner regarding her/his outcomes in relation with the learning objectives. In this sense, feedback should be a compulsory teacher task when performing formative assessment. The teacher must help to align the student's efforts and actions to the goal that has been set. Global evidence shows that students that receive proper feedback from their teachers learn over 65% more - in a given academic year - than their peers who do not receive feedback.

Foster metacognition processes: teachers should help students think about their own learning process more explicitly. To achieve this, teachers must provide students with specific strategies for designing, planning and evaluating their own learning. Teachers require hard training and practice to master this competence because it involves working with students' motivation, disposition and level of development. Academic evidence shows that students trained in metacognition techniques learn over 55% more – in a given academic year - than their peers who do not master metacognition skills.

Cultivate dynamics of collaborative learning: most traditional classrooms lack collaborative learning experiences. Teachers should be able to create working groups, so students can have in-depth interactions and learn from each other on collective tasks. Several didactic strategies can be put in place; however, they share the basic feature of having a common collective task to which every students must contribute and perform multiple activities such as designing, organizing, communicating, deciding and evaluating. Comparative evidence shows that students that learn collaboratively perform over 40% more – in a given school year - than their peers who learn in a traditional manner.

Nurture processes of socio-emotional learning: this skill entails improving

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[4] Contextualized information for Latin America about this strategies is available in https://www.summaedu.org/effective-education-practices-platform/. This platform has been developed in partnership with the Education Endowment Foundation.

students' interaction with others in order to have positive relationships, manage their emotions and take responsible decisions with respect to peers, teachers, family and community. This competence demands teachers to pay attention to emotions and social relationships, rather than focusing exclusively on the academic or cognitive elements of learning. Evidence shows that students with better socio-emotional skills learn over 30% more - in a given academic year - than their peers who do not properly acquire these skills.

Setting higher standards for pre-service education

Countries, such as Chile, which have made consistent improvements in learning outcomes for children have implemented rigorous national standards for teachers that inform the curriculum of pre-service teacher training programs. These programs intend to ensure that aspiring teachers master not only content knowledge (what), but also the pedagogical knowledge (how). The latter involves helping aspiring teachers develop effective practices, such as the ones listed in the previous section of this brief. In order to do this, pre-service programs offer residency-style internships in partnership with the public school system, where aspiring teachers will eventually pursue their careers.

Beside informing teacher training curricula, national standards for the teaching profession may also inform certification processes for pre-service programs put in place by education ministries. Ideally, programs that do not meet these standards should be shut down by regulating agencies, increasing the likelihood that all graduating students are adequately prepared to enter the profession. An important lesson we can learn from the Chilean experience is to implement these reforms gradually, in order to minimize political opposition from powerful stakeholders, beginning by making certification voluntary for a short period, then mandatory and finally making it high stakes (by shutting down non-compliant programs).

A common consequence of the low social status of the teaching profession, in many Latin American countries, is that the least qualified students are the ones seeking teacher training programs. Attracting the most qualified is not an easy task. Countries, such as Chile and Peru have raised the admission standards into teacher programs by requiring a national minimum grade on entrance exams. This needs to be done gradually and in tandem with other measures such as

scholarships for pre-service programs and higher teacher salaries.

In summary, there are important measures for elevating the status and quality of future teachers, thereby raising the quality of the system as a whole; these are: establishing national standards for the teaching profession; ensuring pre-service programs are practice-based and that they have a strong school residency component; implementing a certification process for teacher training programs; and raising the admission standards for students into these programs.

Leveraging professional development through ICTs

Improving initial teacher training will only increase the quality of education systems in the long term, but current students in public schools cannot wait that long. To improve the quality of teachers who are currently in public school classrooms, it is necessary to increase the effectiveness of professional development strategies. The Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) defines professional development as the activities that aim to develop an individual's skills, knowledge, expertise and other characteristics as a teacher. As previously mentioned, these activities should be oriented to develop those fundamental teacher competencies that are more likely to improve learning.

"Collective teacher efficacy", whereby teachers believe their collective work can have a positive impact on students and are able to confirm this belief with evidence of student learning, has been strongly linked to student achievement and needs to be incorporated as a goal of professional development (Eells, 2011; Hattie, 2015). Collective teacher efficacy is achieved through strong collaborative cultures, shared decision-making and by focusing on students' assessments, collective lesson-planning and observations, feedback and reflection for continuous improvement (Brinson and Steiner, 2007; Fullan and Quinn, 2016). Understanding teaching as a collective undertaking shifts the focus of professional development from teachers to schools. Goals change from improving individual capacity to fostering a culture of collaboration in which school leaders, teachers and students are all learning from each other and growing continuously.

In Latin America, Unesco's Third Regional Comparative and Explanatory Study (TERCE) shows that only 26.7% of teachers participated in a professional development activity of at least sixty hours and associated with the school subjects taught, during the two years prior to the survey. This accounts for a low participation of teachers in these training activities (TERCE, 2013). Many of these activities might be delivered through ICTs technologies. Some initiatives across the globe are advancing in this area[5]. There is still a debate about how to provide effective Teacher Professional Development at scale, while ensuring key principles such as quality, equity and cost-effectiveness. (Lim, Tinio, Smith, Bhowmik, 2018).

ICTs provide an effective and efficient platform to train a large number of teachers in those new competencies. In order to achieve this, previous research has identified a group of key principles to deliver effective teacher training (TPD@scale Coalition Secretariat, 2019; Avalos, 2011). Among them, digital technologies need to be focused on pedagogy rather than technology itself; this means that multiple modes of delivery (offline/online/blended) are more likely to be effective. In this sense, a critical factor is to develop high quality materials to be adapted locally and provide incentives for teacher participation. To increase the chances of having an impact, collaborative networks should be formed with national government, local authorities, governmental agencies dedicated to teacher training, universities and NGOs. This approach seeks to make training programs scalable and sustainable.

Ensuring policy coherence

One of the greatest challenges to improve learning outcomes in Latin American, as in other developing regions, is guaranteeing continuity of successful policies. Continuity is essential to reach SDG 4. A promising means of ensuring continuity is to adopt Fullan and Quinn's coherence framework for promoting a whole system change (2016). This framework is conformed by four components: i) focusing direction (having a set of clear goals and strategies), ii) cultivating collaborative cultures (capacity building and collaboration

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[5] Digital Learning for Development (http://dl4d.org/), TPD@scale coalition (https://tpdatscalecoalition.org/), Alianza para la Digitalización educativa en Latino América (ADELA).

vertically and horizontally within and across systems), iii) deepening learning (new pedagogical partnerships with technology as the accelerator), and iv) securing accountability (internally responsible and externally accountable). According to this framework, leadership needs to connect these four components throughout all levels of the system, within classrooms, schools, districts and systems. Effective leaders "use the group to change the group by building deep collaborative work horizontally and vertically across their organizations" (Fullan and Quinn, p. 47).

Professional development efforts by school systems which apply this framework will have a greater chance of improving students' learning in a sustainable way. By ensuring broad and meaningful participation in improvement efforts, collaborative processes are a promising antidote to the discontinuity that often hinders reform efforts.

Moving forward, the greatest challenge for Latin American countries might be to ensure that teachers work as agents of "deep learning"; this is truly transformational education – one that places the learner as someone who can make a positive impact in his own community and the world, as Paulo Freire envisioned (Freire, 1974; Fullan et al, 2018).

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